

# **Harry Potter and the Flesh of the Jade Guardian**

**by Agent 99**

<http://www.fanfiction.net/read.php?storyid=410270>

## **1. Before the Beginning**

“James, wait here,” she insisted brushing the tangled mass of red hair from her face.

“No, I’m fine,” the young man retorted through gritted teeth, brushing sweat from his brow as he struggled to pull himself up the smooth surface of the stone cavern walls. “They couldn’t send Moody on this one, could they?”

The young woman shook her head, her green eyes stubborn. She pressed her hand firmly onto his chest to keep him from standing.

“Darling,” she said softly as he relented. “One, he only has one leg (you’re not better off yourself, considering)...not great for climbing through cave dungeons and two, he’s only off catching about a million Death Eaters. Now back to the subject at hand. You’re staying put. You are in no condition to venture any deeper. That slip back there broke your leg.”

The young man shook his head, forcing a grin onto his face.

“Just a twisted ankle,” he proclaimed, slapping his left leg, which was turned out in an unnatural angle. “Ouch!” grunting, he looked sheepishly back at her.

“Just peachy, I’m sure,” she said knowingly, returning the grin. “Look, if I go alone, we get out of this faster. We can just Apparate home, and I won’t have to wait for you to drag your bum up that last wall. I’ll be doing all the charm work anyway, and really, you’d be hampering my success.”

At that he snorted and then sat silently looking at his twisted leg.

“Can’t we just mend it really quick?” he murmured.

“James, do you remember the last time we tried to mend a broken bone?”

“Well, at least Sirius’s arm wasn’t broken anymore.”

“Sure, but a cheery tree isn’t an arm either.”

“Did we really mess up that badly?”

“I could remind you by turning *your* leg into a cherry tree.”

“Do you mean that?” James said staring up at her thoughtfully. “I suppose I could drag a cherry tree along...” Lily sighed and shook her head.

“Just wait here,” she pressed. James bit his lip and stared at her silently for a moment.

“Lily, I don’t want you up there alone and I don’t want to argue,” he finally sighed as if he knew fighting was futile.

“Ok,” she said.

Surprised, he met her eyes.

“Ok you won’t go up there without me?”

“Ok we won’t argue,” she replied mischievously. Turning serious, she added, “We’re wasting time, I’ll be back, I promise.”

She smiled and kissed him reassuringly, but as she made to stand, he grabbed her hand.

“Really,” he said softly, looking into her adventurous face. “What are we to do if our child ends up as stubborn as you?” She laughed and looked at him adoringly.

“You’ll just have to deal,” she said as he grinned back at her and released her hand.

“I love you, James Potter,” she added softly over her shoulder.

“Ditto, Lily Potter,” he said as she turned and began to climb the wall that led to the grotto. It looked like a mouth, slashed into the cavern, waiting to devour all who dared to enter. Suddenly, a tapping intruded on the relative silence of the cavern, ringing softly off the walls, but it seemed the two souls could not hear it. The rapping continued on and on, not showing any signs of ceasing.

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Harry Potter awoke with a start, flailing his arms and legs slightly. The rapping was not resonating from the cavern walls of his subconscious, but from the window of his room. Shaking off the binds of sleep, he made his way to it and pressed his hands to the cool glass, opening it to allow in his owl, Hedwig. In a flutter of snowy feathers, Hedwig gracefully fluttered to Harry’s shoulder. The gentle weight was comforting, and Harry gratefully accepted a few affectionate nips on the cheek from her. She had been gone several days, disappearing one night after Harry had secretly sent her to deliver letters to Ron, Hermione, Hagrid, and Sirius Black. Sirius had written a few weeks ago to ask how Harry was holding up. Not quite sure what to say, Harry had postponed letter writing.

Harry’s fourth year at Hogwarts had ended with the death of Cedric Diggory and the return of Voldemort—events that had played horribly in his mind like a looping movie on a broken projector. Though he looked forward to finally returning to Hogwarts (the closest thing to home), he dreaded how others would react, whether or not things would return to normal, what Cho Chang would say...

Harry shut his eyes and gripped the windowsill as Hedwig made the short flight to her cage and water dish, where several Owl Treats awaited her. All summer, he was asked if he was all right by everyone that mattered. He had answered “fine”, but deep down he really didn’t know. Since that fateful evening of the Triwizard Tournament, all that had seemed routine—boarding the Hogwarts express, returning to Privet drive, having yet another birthday go unnoticed in the Dursley home—had turned into a terrible countdown to whether or not he’d be all right.

Harry opened his eyes to the sunrise over the quiet street, watching as yet another day was born. Absentmindedly, he traced the faint scar (another to add to his collection) in the crook of his elbow where his own blood had been drawn to raise Lord Voldemort. Since Cedric's death, Harry had been plagued by nightmares. Most of which were so awful he would awake drenched in sweat, violently clawing at the air for one more glimpse of his parents or one last chance to save Cedric. He hadn't shared this with anyone but Sirius, and when he did in a letter at the beginning of summer, concerned notes came by the dozen from his Godfather. Afraid that too many letters endangered Sirius's safety, Harry conceived a lie and wrote him back with claims that the dreams were short-lived. This morning's dream was different than the ones before, however. This one wasn't filled with dread, but had elements of adventure, seriousness, even humor. He had had this dream on several occasions recently, but today was the first time he could recall details. He wondered if the dream meant anything, or was it simply the desperate desire to see his parents in their living state? For now, there was no one and nothing to provide an answer, so he decided to file it away in the back of his mind.

Harry squinted his eyes as the sun rose higher above the distant hills, blurry because he had failed to put on his glasses. It had lifted his spirit immensely receiving cards and gifts from his friends. Ron's gift had been a ridiculous supply of Fred and George's own Weasley Wizard Wheezes, which cheered Harry immensely. From Hagrid, he received a quill kit from France, where the gentle giant was currently residing for the week. A deep red colored owl flew in Hermione's from Bulgaria where she and her family had gone to visit Viktor Krum, the incredible seeker who had played in amazingly in the last Quidditch World Cup. A letter from Krum accompanied her birthday card. He wished both Harry and Ron well.

The gifts were now hidden under Harry's bed and a loose floorboard. Today, Harry thought with genuine happiness, he would see Ron and Hermione at Diagon Alley.

Deciding to seize the moment of peace in the early dawn, Harry headed off to the bathroom to shower and dress.

"Harry!" came the telltale shout of Aunt Petunia through the door. "Hurry your lazy bum out of there!" He didn't know why he was being rushed, because no one else used the tiny closet-sized bathroom but himself. Suddenly, Aunt Petunia added, "You have to vacuum the rugs before we leave!"

"Figures," Harry mumbled pulling on jeans and a long sleeve shirt. He looked at himself in the fogged up mirror over the sink. He had grown considerably taller (though probably not as tall as Ron), his shoulders had broadened slightly, and his face was forming a remarkable resemblance to his father's. His hair was still the same, untamable and the color of a raven, and his eyes peered as green as ever from behind his round frames. It was the first time he noticed how much he had changed from the skinny boy of eleven to what stood before the mirror now. It didn't matter how much taller he had gotten though; it would still take ten of him to fit into Dudley's old wardrobe.

After the rugs were vacuumed, Harry walked in for breakfast. Uncle Vernon was sitting on one side of the table his face twisted as he read an article on Dillon Drills, a rival company of Uncle Dursley's. From his distorted face, Harry could predict his mood...not that it would differ from most mornings.

"Harry!" Uncle Vernon yelled suddenly, snapping Harry back to life. "You're late to the table! Good for nothing...." The last part was inaudible because the large man had replaced his face into the newspaper.

Harry sat down in front of a paper plate with a piece of grapefruit on it. He glanced sideways at Dudley who was now allowed one boiled egg along with his entire half of the fruit. True, his cousin had lost his "bursting-at-the-seams" look, but Harry still couldn't shake that at nearly sixteen, Dudley still hadn't lost the appearance of a pig in a wig. Well, except the fact that he now looked like a pig in a wig with trace amounts of facial hair.

Mindlessly, Harry ran a hand over his own smooth chin, before reaching for the juice jug located near Dudley. As his hand passed near Dudley's plate, the boy hissed threateningly, snatching his plate to his chest. The guy was becoming slightly overprotective of his food rations.

“Where will I drop you off?” Uncle Vernon asked gruffly.

“In front of a bookstore,” Harry said and quickly added, “a *normal* bookstore.”

“Normal?” Uncle Vernon said eyes never leaving the paper. “A place you’re going? Highly unlikely.”

Harry didn’t retort—instead, he picked up the sliver of fruit and swallowed it, mustering a belch for the sake of theatrics.

“Disgusting, under-grown twit,” Aunt Petunia shot in revulsion. Dudley hands clenched around his fork and for a moment Harry feared his cousin would attempt to make part of his arm breakfast. Just for precaution’s sake, Harry moved it off the table.

“You have exactly four hours,” Uncle Vernon growled as Aunt Petunia sat down, sipping coffee from a mug in her bony hands.

“And don’t be getting use to us chauffeuring you about,” the horse-faced woman interjected. “You remember that it’s just because a trip to Harrod’s is in store for us—Duddums needs a mp3 player for his new gym class and a palm organizer. Oh, and a new winter coat...” she went on and on for sometime while Harry’s mind wandered about.

Uncle Vernon’s scowling face brightened proudly as his son smiled at his parents, his chubby cheeks nearly meeting his forehead. Uncle Vernon returned to his paper rather soothed and Aunt Petunia continued to list the new items destined to her darling Dudley.

“That new Play Station console—the last one broke dear, a leather jacket, flat screen tele...”

Without either of his parents noticing, Dudley sent a sneering grin at Harry that rivaled only that of one Draco Malfoy.

“Oh, and an electric razor...he’s growing up so fast.” Aunt Petunia’s eyes misted over and she sniffled a bit as she looked at her son adoringly.

“I’ll never be too old to love you, mum” Dudley replied with a disgustingly sweet smile.

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Harry watched the Dursley’s car speed away deeper into London. As their vehicle became a speck several blocks away near Virgin’s Record Store, Harry turned and entered the Leaky Cauldron nestled near the bookshop he was dropped off at. This was the main highlight of the summer—returning to the wizarding world and his friends. Staying at the Burrow would have been, but Sirius had insisted that Dumbledore would prefer him to stay with the Dursleys. Harry had a hard time swallowing that one, but he knew that there was some sort of safety (unbearable, however) in being with his horrible relatives.

Taking in a deep breath, Harry entered the cleverly inconspicuous Leaky Cauldron entrance, wondering if all the magical community knew of the Triwizard Tournament events. The place was cool and dark, and upon entering, he was met with the most peculiar smells and conversations. He was making his way deeper into the tavern when bits of a conversation between several wizards and a witch caught his attention.

“Those murders weren’t the average murder, you mark my words,” a young man with a goatee was saying loudly. “All killed by the Avada Kedavra.”

“They say its because You-Know-Who is back,” said a witch, who was leaning over the back of her chair at the table beside his.

“Cecil!” exclaimed a wizard with cocoa colored skin. “Don’t go on with those deranged rumors! Really now, the Ministry has yet to announce if it’s You-Know-Who or not. He hasn’t been in the condition to murder since Harry Potter. No Dark Mark either.”

“Well, what about that Ministry woman’s death?” the witch said indignantly. “Why can’t it be He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? The Death Eaters haven’t been keeping a low profile lately, afterall.”

"Those weren't Death Eaters at the World Cup," interjected the Asian man next to her, "Those were lusses drunk from excitement. They barely had enough wit to dissemble when the Ministry showed up."

"But what about the murders yesterday?" the young man spoke up again. "All the victims had the dark mark on their forearm."

"Good riddance then, I say," said another man one seat over, sipping the foam from his brew.

Harry stood awkwardly in the shadow of the bar. He had been out of the wizarding world long enough to be well behind in current events, so the murders were news to him. The wizards' debate had left a sort of uncomfortable residue on his mind. He swallowed it difficultly, attempting to reason with himself that those murders could have been by anyone and he shouldn't jump to conclusions...even if the memory of the Dark Lord's announced agenda of killing all non-returnees of his ring was ringing in Harry's ears.

"Harry!" a familiar voice called. Harry's head turned towards the direction of the voice, and he ducked passed the debating wizards.

Sitting in a far corner booth were Ron and Hermione. Hermione's hand was in the air, waving excitedly. Harry couldn't help the grin that spread on his faced, and he found that forcing thoughts of Voldemort from his head became manageable at the sight of his friends. He reached them quickly, but before he could slide into the booth beside Hermione, she leapt up and gave him a tight hug.

"Oh Harry," she said brightly, pulling away. "It's been ages."

"You keep that up, he's going to suffocate," Ron remarked, before grinning at Harry from his seat.  
"All right, Harry?"

Ron was nearing six feet now, his body was tall and lanky and he had grown a bit into his once awkward height. He was grinning, sporting a very modern, muggle haircut.

"I thought you didn't do muggle studies," Harry noted, poking at the flame-colored chunks of hair.

"Definitely not studies," Ron said, feigning a look of disgust and batting Harry's hand away. "Muggle styles, why not? Do you like it?"

"I'm sure he loves it," Hermione huffed exasperatedly, rolling her eyes and looking at Harry knowingly. "He's been asking total strangers if they liked it all morning."

"Better than your Prince Sylliam's, I reckon," Ron said defiantly, standing up to catch a glance of himself in the mirror behind the bar.

"Its Prince *William*, Ron" Hermione shot back. "And no, he's much more dashing than you. Now sit down before you embarrass yourself, or worse—us."

She leaned to her left as a crumple napkin sailed her way. Harry noted that she too, had changed, so gradually in the past four years, that only now was it noticeable. Her face was more slender now, taking on adult features, and her once very frizzy hair had begun to soften into a smaller...fluff. The reduction of her teeth size had created incredible differences in her smile, which now beamed.

"Congrats on being made a Prefect," Harry spoke up, remembering Hermione's enthused letter he had received early in the summer.

"Thank you," she replied, her cheeks turning pink.

"Who'da guess, eh?" Ron breathed from the corner of his mouth.

"Came as a shock to me," Harry snorted.

"Oh, shut up," she retorted.

There was a small silence as they sat in each other company. Harry finally cleared his throat and spoke.

"I hear there's been some murders yesterday," he said nonchalantly.

Ron looked up at him, his ears turning slightly crimson.

"Oh, you heard?" he said blankly.

"Listen Harry," Hermione said quickly, her face fast becoming serious. "Don't let it get to you. Whatever's happening was pretty much inevitable because the Ministry's choosing to pretend You-Know-who isn't back..."

Harry tried to look unfazed.

"And that's not s'pose to get me?" he said surprising himself by the snappiness of his voice; a tone that was a direct result of the bitterness cultured from the events of last year. "Fudge seems to believe I'm barking mad and Voldemort's a figment of my over-active imagination."

Harry instantly regretted his words as Ron and Hermione flinched, exchanging uncomfortable grimaces.

"My Dad says they don't want to start a panic," Ron said, lowering his voice. "They don't want to connect the murder with You-Know-Who—they claim it's because the Dark Mark hasn't been spotted yet."

"Can I get you kids anything?" Tom, the missing-tooth innkeeper had appeared at their table.

All three slid back against the booth, dropping the subject and turning to meet the gummy smile.

"How bout some chilled juice?" Tom added, wiping his hands on his bar towel. He cast a pity-filled glance at Harry who struggled not to grow irritated.

"That'd be great," Harry managed, forcing a smile for the benefit of the man. Tom brought them some sort of pumpkin cocktail, and they sipped their juice for a few minutes before Harry reminded them of his limited amount of time.

With three and a half hours to spare, they entered Diagon Alley, making a silent agreement to forget the news and enjoy the day.

"Feels great to be back!" Hermione said closing her eyes and breathing deeply.

"Yeah," Harry agreed. Anywhere without the Dursleys felt great.

"It would, eh Hermione?" Ron said plucking at invisible lint on his shirt.

"And what's that suppose to mean?" Hermione queried a bit spicily.

"Nothing..." Ron returned evenly. "Just after spending all that time with Krum...I figured it's nice to return to somewhere so...warm."

"Er...Ron..." Harry said warily.

"Come off it," Hermione replied hotly. "Would you leave me alone about Viktor if I got you another autograph?" Ron scowled and was about to make a retort, but decided against it when he caught the look on Harry's face.

"Come on then," he sighed, stepping ahead of Harry and Hermione. "Quidditch Supplies first—got to balance out scholastic endeavors with a little pleasure."

Before Harry knew it, he, Ron, and Hermione were heading back to the Leaky Cauldron, their arms laden with bags and parcels. Harry enjoyed the day thoroughly, bumping into friends (and enemies, but even Malfoy failed to put Harry in a bad mood) all over Diagon Alley.

"So you can give me a ride to King's Cross, right?" Harry asked Hermione, as they entered the back door of the Cauldron.

"Sure," she replied before pausing thoughtfully, no doubt remembering her first encounter with the Dursleys. "We'll be there early September first."

Suddenly a flash of identical, redheaded boys flew past them.

“You didn’t see us!” one of the Weasley twins hollered over his shoulder.

“Brilliant impression of blazing fire you two are doing!” Ron called after them.

“What do you s’pose those two have done this time?” Harry inquired as they walked through the Cauldron and approached the twins, who were now huddled in a corner table up front. They seem ready to burst with laughter and lack of air.

“Harry!” George said reaching up and slapping him on the shoulder. “Missed you, sorry to hear you couldn’t stay this summer.” Fred was nodding his head in agreement, his muscular shoulders trembling with laughter.

“We did some experimental testing on our latest product today,” said Fred finally.

“Our original Tooth to Tusk sprinkles—a new line from Weasley Wizard Wheezes,” George said pulling a small bottle of said topping from his pocket.

“One dash and your teeth become tusks.”

Ron quickly glanced at Hermione who now had one hand pressed against her mouth.

“Whom did you...tusk?” she mumbled consciously through her fingers. The big teeth issue hit close to home for her.

“Draco Malfoy,” Fred said nonchalantly, taking the sprinkles from George and putting them into his pocket. “He sure likes sprinkles on his knickerbockers glories, doesn’t he, George?”

“The Tooth to Tusk sprinkles were a success,” noted George pointedly. Motioning them closer, he added, “The tusks were so heavy Malfoy nose-dived head first into his ice cream. He looked like an underfed walrus in beach foam.”

They all burst out laughing, and even Hermione couldn’t manage to suppress a chortle.

“Imagine Malfoy with tusk,” Fred gasped. “Thrashing in a dish of ice cream.”

“Sorry we missed it,” Harry said just as a loud honking demanded his attention. They all looked up to find the Dursley’s immaculate car parked impatiently in a metered spot.

Harry, still grinning, painfully pulled himself up from the table. Hastily said his goodbyes and gathered up his parcels, making for the door.

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Lily Potter climbed into the grotto and pressed on alone into the rather foreboding arms of the darkness. She stooped to avoid smacking her head on the roof of rock.

“Lumos,” Lily whispered before making any more attempts to going forward. Far below, she could hear the echo of James’s heavily stressed sigh, which made her smile.

“Good,” she muttered. “Let him suffer a bit.”

The pendant would be hidden amongst challenges and guarded by a sort of guardian, whose own protection was unbeknownst to Lily. The passage seemed to wind downwards slightly and she had to fight the claustrophobia that strove to grip her as she pressed herself against the stone walls.

In the distance the steady dripping of water echoed and she pressed on, following the sound. At last, she arrived at the stone shores of a cave lake. The meager light of the wand seemed to drown in the dark water, which softly reflected mounted torches alit with eerie green flames. Using a tricky little charm, she enlarged the range of light and saw that it cast into view a bobbing gondola. She squinted her eyes and instinctually stepped back from the shore. Standing as still as the stone making up the cave, was a strange, emaciated figure with clawed, black hands clutched around an oar. It was cloaked in black and Lily could only make out the top of its twisted, oily-black face and lamp-like eyes.

“A water ghoul,” she muttered staring at the figure as it began to push the little boat towards her.

“Gollum I am called,” it said in a voice that seemed to tear the air around it. “But a riddle that is not.”

"What is your price for crossing the lake?" Lily asked struggling to keep her face stolid.

"An impossible price," it replied snidely. "A wrong answer from Gollum."

"But it must be possible if others have gotten to the pendant before," she remarked, equally snide. The creature flinched ever so slightly.

"It is in the past and Gollum knows all of the past."

"Sure you do."

Gollum creature hissed unpleasantly in return as it pushed the boat to the shore.

"Gollum and Human will take turns asking riddles," it rasped, "until either Human or Gollum guesses wrong. If Gollum guesses wrong, Gollum will take Human to the other side." The ghoul was becoming thoroughly giddy now.

"If Human guesses wrong, Human will be supper for Gollum."

"Wow," Lily murmured thoughtfully. "What a bargain! I figured a blood-curdling fellow like yourself would charge me my soul or still-beating heart at the least."

"Gollum likes hearts," the creature hissed, salivating. "Gollum likes them sliced thin."

"Yes, lovely," Lily answered. Inside, she was shaking with revulsion, but she was buying herself some time to think of a riddle. It was Remus who was good at these things, not her.

"Not particularly my flavor," she managed. "Personally I like a nice steak and kidney pudding...cooked, of course."

"No more wasting eternity," Gollum finally choked. Obviously the thought of eating something other than cold, blind, fish from the cave lake was too delightful to bear.

"All right," Lily sighed exasperatedly. It was taking her ever thought to remain cool and quick. She thought of her Old English class she had taken after her years at Hogwarts and came up with several difficult riddles that could curdle the brain.

*"Oft must I with wave strive and with wind fight,  
together against them contend, when I depart seeking  
wave-covered earth; foreign is land to me,  
I am strong for that strife if I become still;  
if I fail of that, they are stronger than I.  
wish to carry away the thing I protect.  
I withstand that if my tail holds out  
and stout stones can hold me  
fast against them. "*

Something that vaguely resembled a grin formed upon Gollum's wretched face.

"That one was old," it murmured. "But young compared to Gollum. The riddle speaks of an anchor."

"Yeah, well," Lily replied evenly. "I thought I'd start off easy...give you a bit of a hope."

The water ghoul grunted and cleared its slimy throat to begin its riddle.

*"Moth ate words. It seemed to me  
a curious chance, when that wonder I learned,  
that the worm for swallowed some man's song,  
thief in darkness the glorious speech  
and its foundation. Thievish guest was  
no whit the wiser for swallowing words. "*

Its grin was satisfied as the one on Lily's face faltered. She chose to recline on the protruding stone behind her to make up for the flimsy grin. The wheels where going so frantically in her mind she feared its cacophonous gears would be audible to Gollum.

“A rather old one,” Lily murmured.

“Gollum is master of the past.”

Lily ran the words through her mind over and over again. *It seemed to me a curious chance, when that wonder I learned, that the worm for swallowed some man's song...* It was a creature that fed on the words of men...*Thievish guest was no whit the wiser for swallowing words...* but whatever ‘it’ was, it couldn’t be smart enough to understand them. Just then she remembered a similar riddle James had tattooed into her school books their sixth year to no doubt, infuriate her.

“It’s a book worm,” she replied. The face of the ghoul fell, but he had no time to react as she had begun her next.

“‘What is the beginning of eternity? The end of time and space. The beginning of every end. And the end of every place?’”

“The letter E,” the creature replied amused. Lily was taken aback by its nimbleness and her crest-fallen face said it. Gollum cackled dryly and continued in a mocking manner.

“Gollum’s turn. ‘What is it that goes up and goes down but does not move?’”

“Er...” Lily was stumped. The creature had retaliated on her simple riddle with one that was equally bare of clues. As of now, the only thing she could think of that didn’t move but was yammering about enough to make her queasy was her brain.

“Hold on...”

“Gollum will try,” it murmured, slipping a gray tongue from its black, bladed, mouth.

“What goes up and down, but doesn’t move?” Lily whispered, furrowing her brows. It was becoming difficult to concentrate on the riddle now that she was wondering if she could possibly survive if she shot a curse at the creature before making a dash to the grotto. She knew, however that the agreement to play a water ghoul’s game was magically binding. Lily’s hands were shaking now and she crossed her arms to hide them.

The ghoul was beginning to cackle again and the sound echoed a chilling note throughout the cavern.

“Its erm....” fear clutched at Lily’s throat as she tried to answer the riddle. She was beginning to wonder if it would hurt to die, if she would ever see James again, have their child, or even see the sun...

“That’s it!” Lily exclaimed suddenly. “The sun! It goes up and down, but never moves!” Gollum was suddenly struck silent as if Lily had reached out the few feet out over the water and slapped him.

“Human is good at guessing,” it muttered. “It is Human’s turn.”

Lily was gripped by fear again. Thinking up riddles became most complicated when one was about to be ripped apart and served as a delicacy.

“All right,” she began, returning to her reclined position on the rock. The first (and only) riddle that came to mind was a ridiculous one that was more joke than brainteaser. It was all she had left.

“Hurry,” the creature insisted. “Gollum’s stomach calls for flesh.”

“Hold on!” she exclaimed, thoroughly nerve-wracked.

“The magic that binds this agreement is old,” Gollum replied. “But my hunger is older.” Lily was forced to spit out her ridiculous riddle.

“‘Two fellows are alone in the desert, one is dead. The one who is alive has an empty pack while the dead man has something in his. What’s in the dead fellow’s pack?’”

The water ghoul was silent. Lily thought that her heart had stopped.

“It is...It is...” Gollum began curling its body a bit. “One dead...one alive...what’s in the dead fellow’s pack?” Lily swallowed and struggled to grin.

“Could you hurry? I’m a bit hungry,” she said smugly.

Time began to crawl by, and Lily was amazed it could not guess the answer.

“Well?” she pressed. Suddenly, she was thrown back by a horrifying shriek that rippled through her entire body. Gollum cried out again and with hasty hands, it propelled the gondola forward until it grounded inches from Lily. Gollum reached out and snatched Lily’s collar, pulling her to her feet.

“Gollum knows it’s...Gollum knows it’s...” its breath was rancid and Lily swallowed the urge to retch.

“Gollum knows it’s what?” she shot with eyes narrowed. Slowly, its black-clawed hands let go of her and she stumbled away.

“Gollum does not know...” it murmured. It moved in its gondola to reveal a seat, which Lily took reluctantly.

“On your return, Human will find a bridge only usable from the other shore.”

She had done it. She had defeated the ghoul’s game. In silence, the creature propelled the boat to the unseen shore on the other side. Lily’s hands right hand began to ach and she noticed that she was clenching her fist around her wand. At last, the craft grounded and she brushed past the cloaked creature. Before she could take more than a few steps however, it called to her.

“Human will not tell the answer?” it asked. For a moment she nearly took pity on the creature...before she remembered it wanted to eat her.

“A parachute was in the dead man’s pack,” she answered and quickly departed into another dark passageway, leaving Gollum to ponder why it was the dead man with a parachute in his pack and not the live one and his empty stomach. She did not see a boy with dark, untamed hair and green eyes that reflected her own, watching from a rock island in the water. How could she if she was only a dream?

## 2. A Return to "Normalcy"

Uncle Vernon didn't seem pleased that Harry would be obtaining a ride from a friend from school. Harry watched as his bulk shuddered behind the morning paper, rustling the newsprint like leaves in the wind.

"How are these...people coming here?" Uncle Vernon finally asked, peering from over the top of the paper. Clearly, the memory of the Weasley carpool was very much on his mind.

"In the normal way," Harry said evenly. Seeing as that did little to slow the mad artery pumping wildly at Dursley's temple, he hastily added, "By car. You know...four wheels, usually has an engine..."

Uncle Vernon scowled but instead of telling Harry off for his cheek, he picked at his high fiber wheat toast and grapefruit slices.

"Are you sure?" he grunted suspiciously, looking at Harry again, his mustache twitching with apprehension.

"Yes," Harry said, slightly amused at how well his uncle was taking it. "They live in a normal house and they drive a normal car. In fact, I hear they're superbly ordinary dentists."

"Liberals, I'll bet," Uncle Vernon muttered. "A child at that school..." That seemed to satisfy him because he was suddenly quietly reading the paper again.

The doorbell rang and Harry quickly made for the front foyer. Despite his haste, Aunt Petunia beat him to it. She opened the door cautiously, slipping her horse-like face around the edge.

"Hello," a man said brightly. He was barely hidden by Aunt Petunia's spindly frame. "We're the Grangers, you must be Mrs. Durs—" he was cut off by Aunt Petunia flinging the door open and stepping aside. Lips pursed and chin held snobbishly high, she stalked off past Harry into the kitchen without a glance.

A handsome couple stood at the entrance, rather flabbergasted, staring into the spotless foyer.

"Hi Harry!" called Hermione slipping past her parents. "Come on or we'll be late."

Harry couldn't help grinning at her as she pointedly ignored Dudley, who was overcome by a fit of sniggers at the sight of her bushy hair. It seemed he hardly remembered that Hermione was indeed a witch and that he was very much afraid of magic.

"Sorry about that Mr. and Mrs. Granger," Harry said. "Please, come in."

"Make it quick boy!" Uncle Vernon's voice registered rather shrilly from the kitchen making it clear there would be no invitation for tea.

With the Granger's help, Harry's things were packed into the their (normal) car in record time. As Harry made one more trip back to his room to fetch Hedwig's cage, he noticed that the Dursleys were now watching the Grangers suspiciously from the kitchen door. Dudley had actually moved his huge, orange clad bulk to the living room to better watch Harry's things leave number four. Hermione rushed back in as her dad shut Harry's things in the boot of the car.

"Is that all, Harry?" she asked. She stopped short and allowed herself to acknowledge Dudley's rude stare from the corner of her eye at last.

"Yeah," Harry replied showing her the cage. "All done, thanks."

With that, he stepped over the threshold to certain freedom and happily called a farewell over his shoulder. He was answered by a soft "Hallelujah" from Dudley. Hermione paused and turned to eye the large boy. Harry nearly fell backwards as she grabbed the back of his shirt to stop him. Winking at him, Hermione faced Dudley and furrowed her brow.

"Boo!"

Dudley, defying the laws of gravity, jumped a foot off the couch.

"I couldn't resist," she whispered to Harry as he led the way out grinning.

"Is that all, Pumpkin?" Mr. Granger asked Hermione as they approached the car. He was a tall, lanky man with brown hair, square spectacles, and a neat mustache. He smiled wickedly, nodding towards number four.

"Your relatives are right charming, aren't they?"

The front door slammed shut. Harry grinned.

"They couldn't charm snakes."

"Come on, we've got a train to catch," Mrs. Granger announced, attempting a reproachful look at her husband through a bemused smile. She was a lovely lady, and the resemblance was very clear between her and her daughter. They all climbed into the car and made for King's Cross.

\* \* \*

Pushing their trunks on two carts, Harry and Hermione inconspicuously slipped onto platform nine and three-quarters. They made their way onto the train, stowing their luggage and seeking an empty compartment to save for themselves and Ron.

"Where is he?" Hermione muttered as the whistle blew, signaling the Hogwarts Express's awaiting departure. Large crowds of students were piling onto the train, laughing and calling to their friends. Harry and Hermione squeezed their way back onto the platform in search of the Weasleys. Suddenly, two identical, redheaded boys plowed their way through the gates.

"Bye Mum!" one of them yelled over their shoulder.

"We'll send love later, don't have time to profess our affections now!" his brother added.

A girl with long crimson hair burst through after them, toting her rucksack over her shoulder.

"Ginny, hurry!" Mrs. Weasley's voice called from somewhere behind her. Mr. Weasley followed his daughter with her trunk, his mouth looking considerably swollen. Hermione eyed Harry, who shrugged in response.

Hermione and Harry both craned their necks in search of Ron and he finally appeared, hastily parting the crowd with Mrs. Weasley. He was walking nearly half bent, ardently paying attention to his mother as he pushed his cart quickly towards the train.

"And Ron don't forget you have O.W.L.s this year," Mrs. Weasley was saying, "you do your bit and study! And keep an eye on your sister."

"Sure, Mum," he replied tragically as she stuffed a sandwich into his hand.

"Better yet," she added firmly, watching as Fred and George Weasley collided with the train conductor, "keep an eye on the twins, too."

Ron sighed and his mother hugged him good-bye. He luggered his trunk into the compartment and waved his father out.

"Ron!" Hermione called making her way towards him.

"Hullo," he said grinning, stepping back onto the platform.

"So what was it this time?" she inquired with a raised eyebrow. "You very nearly didn't make it."

Just then, Mrs. Weasley appeared at by her side.

"Hello, Hermione," she said warmly giving the girl a quick hug. "My, certainly grown up over the summer, you have!"

Hermione blushed furiously. Mrs. Weasley had certainly warmed up to her since a certain Rita Skeeter, one very pesky columnist, took leave from her writings early that summer.

"Not really," Hermione mumbled shyly.

"And Harry!" Mrs. Weasley turned to him and he felt his cheeks go pink. She stood on tiptoe to hug him and he graciously returned it. "You've gotten so tall!"

Ron snorted and Harry had to resist giving his friend a good elbow in the ribs...now that he could reach, that is.

"How are you, Mrs. Weasley?" Harry asked.

"Oh, wonderful!" she replied, before warily eying the twins. "For the most part."

She then leaned toward him, her eyes full of motherly concern.

"And you Harry? You holding up well?"

"Great," Harry said, perhaps a little too quickly. "I mean, now that it's time to go back..."

It was half true. Harry couldn't wait to return to one of the few places he found solace, but just thinking about the way his peers had reacted to his presence at the end of last year made his stomach churn. The whistle blew once more, signaling its awaiting departure.

"Oh, don't you think on it," Mrs. Weasley said intuitively, squeezing Harry's elbow. She gave them one last smile as she glanced around in the direction of the twins' hasty exit from her sight. "Good bye, sweethearts"

She reached up and gave Ron a final kiss before making for a window that Fred and George were frantically trying to shut. Harry grinned and led Ron and Hermione onto the train just as Mr. Weasley finished stowing Ginny's trunk. He smiled at them and stepped onto the platform.

"Gwoo bwhy," he said pleasantly through swollen lips.

"Good bye, Mr. Weasley," Hermione and Harry called, looking at Ron who was suddenly red in the face with his battle against a furious fit of laughter.

"We whur late," Mr. Weasley stated sheepishly, patting his reddening son on the shoulder. They grinned and waved to Mrs. Weasley who was a few windows down wagging a finger at the twins.

Ron, gasping with laughter, followed Harry and Hermione to one of the compartments they had saved earlier. He wobbled in and collapsed into a window seat.

"Ron," Harry said as he sat down next to him, "are you going to need medical attention?" Ron nodded his head yes. Hermione blew her hair out of her face exasperatedly, sitting down across from them. There was a loud mewing from the wicker basket perched on the seat beside her. She opened the top and pulled out Crookshanks, her bandy-legged tabby, still looking curiously at Ron

"What's wrong with your dad? Toothache?" Harry asked looking out the window. At the mention of 'toothache', Ron burst into even more laughter. At last, he drew in a long breath and sighed, shaking his head.

"Well," Ron began with a grin, "this morning Mum was real nice and made chocolate chip pancakes for us. It just so happen George and Fred concocted trip chocolate chips of their own for there Tooth to Tusk line."

The train was moving now and they could hear the echo of Mrs. Weasley's voice hollering one last threat at the twins.

"Anyway, Fred and George were early to breakfast and were busy discussing their teeth enlarging chocolate chips. They were arguing about how much should be in a marketed bottle and got caught up in a mild debate, sending the open package back and forth, weighing it and such. Well, mum turned around and plopped down our plate of hot cakes and when she looked away, Fred accidentally spilled the joke chips onto Dad's pancakes. They tried to scoop it up, but Dad walked in and sat down looking a bit...frazzled. He took one look at the pancakes and completely fell in love with mum again. George and Ginny tried to tell him, but he kept on saying he didn't want to hear any of their troubles until after breakfast. Well, after two bites of his chocolate chip pancakes..."

"Oh no," Hermione gasped.

"Oh yes."

"He grew tusk?" Harry asked feeling the beginnings of a laugh (feeling slightly guilty of course, as he adored Mr. Weasley).

"Big ones, it's why we're so late."

Ron and Harry burst into laughter and though Hermione made a valiant effort at keeping the reprimanding look on her face, she soon broke and joined in.

"I'm surprised Fred and George are alive!" she exclaimed.

"I reckon mum would have done them off if we weren't already so bloody late," Ron snorted.

The rest of the train trip consisted of laughing and talking, as well as a steady stream of visitors. Most everyone was cheerful enough, if not a bit reserved around Harry. It was enough, however, to curb whatever anxieties Harry housed about returning to Hogwarts. Those of his peers who had stopped by had reacted better than he had expected.

Harry grinned to himself as he watched Ron nearly unseat Hermione and Crookshanks as he dived for Pigwidgeon, his tiny owl, whom had escaped from his cage.

When they had finally pulled on their robes and reached Hogwarts, night had fallen and a cool breeze lifted their hair. They had shared their carriage with Neville Longbottom ("Fantastic Ron, love your hair!") and were now walking into the entrance hall together.

"I'm starving!" Ron announced.

"You just ate a package of chocolate frogs!" Hermione noted, nudging him in the back.

"Nearly an hour ago!" he replied wide-eyed. "Where's the nosh?"

"With the loads you eat, Ron," Harry said, "it must be magic you're so skinny."

"I'm a growing boy," Ron replied soberly. "Wish I could say the same for you."

"Not everyone can be a troll, I guess," Harry countered.

They entered the Great Hall and as Harry saw the large swarm of students, the anxiety returned full measure. He followed Ron towards the Gryffindor table, his eyes cast down because he didn't want to look at anyone, lest they thought he didn't remember that he bared the guilt of Cedric's death. Harry managed to lift his head long enough to spot Cho Chang several feet away. She caught his eye. Her petite form seemed lost in the swirl of black-robed students, but never the less, he saw her. To Harry's surprise, she smiled and waved, though sadness was evident in her face. He waved back awkwardly, slightly relieved that she hadn't turned away from him in disgust.

Harry seated himself awkwardly, meeting Ron and Hermione's eyes. They both looked knowingly at him, and Harry knew that nothing would be that bad as long as he still had them. This was home after all—a little stiffer than he had remembered, but still Hogwarts.

The High Table was filled with teachers waiting for the feast to begin. Within minutes, Albus Dumbledore, the Headmaster, was clinking his goblet for their attention as Professor Flitwick set up a stool and the familiar old Sorting Hat before the High Table. The Headmaster waited for silence, beaming at his pupils. The room quieted.

"Welcome back!" Dumbledore said, the candlelight emphasizing the twinkle of the wise, pale, blue eyes. "Yet another year has begun. Tonight, I find it my obligation to inform you of all the key points that will make this year very different from any other." He paused and grew uncharacteristically serious.

"Last year's Triwizard games was one that brought a tragic result, but it also brought us knowledge, new friends, and wisdom. Those qualities are very important now that an old threat is upon us."

"Dad's infuriated with the Ministry," Ron whispered to Harry, furrowing his brow angrily. "He's been wasting too many hours there trying to get them to wizen up." Harry felt his own blood began to heat as he thought of what he had revealed to the Minister of Magic last year, and how Fudge had reacted: much like a naïve, arrogant, child. However, though Minister refused to believe Harry that Voldemort had returned, Harry hardly doubted that the wizarding community could ignore the signs. Everyone could feel that something was amiss—they just didn't know if it was the Dark Lord or not yet.

"Do not be reckless," Dumbledore was saying. "I advise against wandering about the grounds alone, especially at night. During visits to Hogsmeade (which regrettably, will not be so frequent this year), keep to the well-populated areas of town. And especially, please be weary of strangers. If ever you feel in danger, please report to a staff member immediately."

Dumbledore stared at the downfallen faces. He seemed to know the speech would not be entirely welcomed, but he was taking on the job that the Ministry still refused to do. Over the summer, it was he who informed the students and their families against the Minister's wishes. His white beard glistened in the mingling light of the torches and stars of the enchanted ceiling.

"However, Quidditch shall resume," Dumbledore continued with a smile. "I expect a very exciting game year from our teams and players."

At that, the spirits lightened, and a loud cheer went through the hall. "Quidditch" was music to Harry's ears. He hadn't even been on a broomstick since his first challenge in the Triwizard Tournament last year.

"So let us get on with the Sorting, and finally the jewel of the evening"—Dumbledore paused dramatically—"Dinner."

With that, the new first years began to line up along the wall and approached the Sorting Hat apprehensively as they were called. Soon, it was over and the first years where settled into their House tables.

"At long last," Ron sighed as food and drink began to materialize onto the golden platters, tureens, goblets, and pitchers. The food met Harry's every expectation as usual. Hermione cast an annoyed look when Ron graciously praised the house elves on their delightful cooking. Soon it was over and everyone proceeded to the exits, the prefects leading their Houses to their dormitories, armed with their shinny badges and the knowledge of their respected passwords.

Hermione left Ron and Harry to lead the Gryffindors up toward their tower. In the common room, no one dwelled long. Most said good night and yawning, made their way to their dormitories. Ron and Harry said goodnight to Hermione and made their own way up to the fifth year dormitory they shared with Dean, Seamus, and Neville. There was content laughter and conversations as they changed into their pajamas.

Exhausted, but considerably happier then when he had first entered the Great Hall, Harry collapsed onto his four-poster, pulling the curtains around him. True, the year would be unpredictable with the return of Voldemort, but Harry couldn't help but feel the threat was very far away now that he was home. Here he had friends, Dumbledore, and Quidditch. But it wasn't enough to push the mounting episode of dreams from his mind. Before he knew it, he was within the heart of the cave dungeons again, watching his mother just as he had in the last episode of images.

She was breathing slowly, repeatedly glancing behind her. Often, she checked her wand, asking it to point due west, toward the heart of the caves. Finally, the narrow passages opened into a large cavern alit with torches that would burn for eternity. There was only one entrance, and she was standing in it. It appeared she had reached a dead end. She examined the bare cavern before her eyes trailed to a stone table in the middle of the room where a golden sword lay. On the wall opposite of the entrance was a line, tattooed onto the rock and marked by a gleaming piece of jade. Both stone and sword flashed so brightly, Lily squinted against the gleam.

"Nox," she whispered, letting her wand extinguish its own weak light. The sword was not encrusted with jewels, but bore a single, stunning, green stone in its hilt. Pocketing her wand in the cargo pocket of her hiking trousers, she reached out a hand inches from the precious metal, seemingly trying to decide if all she had to do was pick it up. Time seemed to stop and a bit of sweat trickled down her brow.

"Oh well," Lily muttered with a shuddering breath, "live and let die." She grabbed the hilt of the sword and gasped. Despite the chill of the cavern, the metal was warm to the touch and was light as air despite its size.

"That's it?" she whispered, amazed at the lack of obstacles. Her amazement melted into fear as a shadow whipped over her face. She turned quickly and found the entrance of the cavern empty.

Harry's heart was racing with his mother's and he wanted her to bolt back through the cavern to his father. But she held her ground.

Clutching the sword, Lily circled slowly. Suddenly, she was flung across the chamber by unseen hands, the sword clattering away from her. She scrambled to her feet, stunned, frantically trying to see what had attacked her in the dim firelight. The flames of the torches rose to a roaring height, allowing Lily to see her attacker and scream.

"No!" Harry yelled flinging back the hangings of his bed. His heart was pounding in his chest so that he felt his ribs would crack.

"Wasn't me—," there was a loud crash as Ron tumbled from his bed.

"What is it, Harry?" Seamus asked sleepily. Harry was shaking violently and struggled to catch his breath.

"Who yelled?" Neville asked poking his head from out of his own four-poster. Dean leaned out curiously from his own bed.

"No—nothing," Harry muttered. "Sorry, I just had a nightmare, I'm all right."

Ron, having regained consciousness, was peering at Harry from the floor, rather suspiciously.

"You sure, mate?" he asked slowly.

"Yeah," Harry answered feeling his cheeks burn with embarrassment. He gazed at each face peering out at him. "Yeah, just a nightmare."

All four boys stared at him.

"Snape was in it," he hastily added.

"Well, in that case," Seamus answered slipping back behind his curtains, "I totally understand." Neville nodded his agreement. Ron raised an eyebrow and Harry tired to flash him a reassuring smile in the dark.

"Snape, eh?" Dean said shaking his head sympathetically. Seamus yawned and said good night, as did Neville. Ron cast Harry one more curious look before climbing into his own bed.

Harry's heart had finally returned to a normal, functional pace, and he finally lay back onto his pillows. He could only stare into the darkness, feeling the terror he saw his mother feel. The dreams were so very real, straightforward, and he knew what his mother was thinking...not at all like a normal dream. Harry allowed his mind to slide around in the silence.

\* \* \*

"Good morning!" Hermione said cheerfully as Ron and Harry sat down on either side of her the next morning. She had her new third edition Arithmancy book propped against the milk pitcher. Ron groaned.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you it's rude to read at the table?" he asked reaching across her plate for some porridge.

"One," she replied defiantly, brushing his hand away before passing him the porridge. "You're not one to take lessons on manners from. And two, I'm *skimming*—"

"Big difference," Ron interjected.

"This class gets more in depth this year. I have to be prepared."

Harry laughed, shoveling warm kippers into his mouth.

"What?" she asked plainly, cocking an eyebrow.

"I reckon you're more prepared than Professor Vector," he said. Ron grinned his agreement.

"Hiya, Hermione," said Dean. He sat across from her, completely oblivious to Ron or Harry. "I meant to say this last night, but..." Dean paused thoughtfully. "Anyway, I just wanted to say congratulations on becoming a prefect."

"Thanks," Hermione said her face melting into pleased embarrassment.

"I couldn't imagine anyone else who could match you," Dean blurted out with a crooked grin, before quickly turning away.

Dean seems particularly interested in Hermione this morning, Harry thought. Perhaps Krum's interest in her was contagious. He smiled inwardly and turned to ask Ron to pass the toast to find Ron's face tinged with pink. He was watching both parties intently.

"Hardly," Hermione was saying rather bashfully, closing her Arithmancy book.

"They'd be scared not to make you prefect," Ron grunted, his face flushing now as he threw a glare at Dean. "You'd probably go rabid on the school if they didn't."

Hermione's eyes flashed, but before she could snap back, she was interrupted by groans all about the table. McGonagall was handing out their timetables. As Ron received his, his attention was momentarily drawn from Hermione.

"Excuse me, Professor?" he said slowly, turning his card around. "There's a mistake on mine. It says Defense against the Dark Arts is postponed."

"It's not a mistake, Weasley," McGonagall answered snappishly, handing Hermione and Harry their timetables. "It has been postponed until our Professor arrives." Then she added, "I recommend you worry about what's on your schedule rather than what's not on it."

"You'd think it'd be a really important class this year," Ron noted. McGonagall stared at him for a moment, letting the chill of her gaze freeze his insides. "But I'm sure the new professor will be great," he added with a weak grin.

McGonagall sighed and continued on.

"I wonder who'll our Defense professor will be," Hermione said thoughtfully packing her book into her bag.

"Me too," piqued in Dean.

"Oh, belt up," Ron muttered too quietly for Dean to hear.

"Who in their right mind would take that job?" Harry queried.

"That's what I'm worried about," Hermione said. "No one in their right mind would."

\* \* \*

"So lets say you find yourself caught in the snare of a man eating plant," said Professor Sprout as she walked about the class between the Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors. "What must you avoid and how would you escape?" Neville's hand shot up into the air alongside Hermione's.

"Neville?" the professor called, surprised at his readiness.

"You must avoid the fangs because they have powerful hallucinogens that can render you immobile instantly, and to escape it, you must expose it to light, fire, or extreme heat."

"Bet Hermione wouldn't get that one," Ron muttered to Harry who stifled a chuckle. Hermione, eyes glued straight ahead pulled out her wand from her pocket under the table. She leaned over and set a bit of Ron's robes alight with her curious blue flames.

"Ack!" Ron yelled, jumping to his feet in a frantic dance just as Hermione extinguished them.

"Mr. Weasley?" Professor Sprout inquired, pushing a bit of frizzy hair back into her hat. "Is there something you'd like to add?" Ron stopped and patted his robes, before looking up to find curious stares from both the Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors. He grinned sheepishly at them.

"Ack...er...Ack-zactly right, Neville!" He sputtered throwing Neville a thumbs up. "Brilliant go, mate!" Hermione was red trying to fight fits of giggles; Harry's head was wedged into his textbook. Behind them, Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil were giggling softly along with Hannah Abbot and Ernie Macmillan.

"Yes..." Sprout agreed slowly, raising an eyebrow. "I believe Mr. Weasley is correct in noting your expertise...if not a bit overexcited. Ten points to Gryffindor." Neville beamed appreciatively and blushed. He sat down and grinned weakly at Harry, who caught his eye momentarily.

After copying down the homework, the bell rang and they gathered up their things to leave for lunch.

"Hermione," Ron muttered, "you're pure evil."

"Well," she said smiling sweetly, "goes to prove I'm a bona fide witch."

"I thought you said you couldn't dance," Harry added. "You were quite good from what I could tell."

"Oh, shut up," Ron growled.

They left the greenhouses for the castle, stomachs grumbling. When they reached the Great Hall the Weasley twins intercepted them before they could sit down for food.

"Guess what, Harry?" George asked.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Angelina Johnson was just made team captain this morning," Fred said grinning-it was no secret he fancied her.

"Angelina?" Hermione exclaimed. "That's fantastic!"

"Yeah, that's top," Harry said, grinning as he took a seat opposite Fred and George.

"She'll be fantastic, with us to give her a heads up, of course," George said thumping his chest.

"God have mercy on her soul," Ron mumbled under his breath

"That's not nice!" they returned in unison. Ron shrugged slyly and glanced at the table.

"Sandwiches!" he said happily. "And not a sign of one being corned beef!"

"Anyway, tryouts are going to be in two weeks," Fred continued, helping himself to a turkey on rye Ron was holding. "We kind of need a Keeper with Wood going off and graduating. The old prat."

Harry laughed, rather missing their uptight, hardworking team captain who was currently training with a national reserve team. Hermione was looking at George who had grown quiet.

"Why so blue?" she questioned, spooning soup into her bowl. George sighed melodramatically and bit into his sandwich.

"Madame Hooch never even considered us for team captains."

\* \* \*

The day could have been bright, brilliant, close to perfect...had they not had potions as their last class.

"As you all are aware," said Professor Snape as he walked about the class, passing out a thick packet of parchment, "you are expected to take O.W.Ls at the end of the year." He returned to the front of the room eyeing the Gryffindors with an especially violent and very familiar contempt. But he looked a bit paler than usual and his dark greasy hair was threaded with gray.

"I remind you all of the importance of passing them," Snape continued flatly, "and I pray perhaps your stupidity will take a holiday during exams."

Hermione flipped through her packet, her brow furrowed as she read the list of potions in the contents. The first five pages contained a huge list of potions they had learned since coming to Hogwarts. A page after that contained yet more study material on cauldrons, strainners, ladles, and the like.

Ron groaned as he sifted idly through his own packet, casting a mournful glance at Harry, who undoubtedly mirrored his woeful expression.

"These are study packets designed to help refresh your memory," Snape was saying, crossing his arms over his chest. Gazing at Neville he added, "For some, there is no memory to refresh." Neville coughed and stared at the ground, suddenly interested in a beetle eye on the floor.

"Potter!" Snape addressed, turning around to face him. Harry cringed, struggling to look his professor in the eye.

"Yes?" he asked, trying to sound indifferent. Snape glared at him in return.

"Name me the compounds of the Sleeping Draught."

Harry glanced nervously down at his packet, praying that somehow the answer would materialize through the cover.

"Not fast enough, Potter," Snape said shortly, walking away. "Five points from Gryffindor." Malfoy sneered and leaned in Harry's direction.

"Good answer," he said sarcastically, as several Slytherins sniggered into their hands.

"Shut up, Toothy," Harry hissed. Malfoy glared angrily, running his tongue over his teeth. The twins' tusk testing was obviously still a fresh wound for him. The bell rang and everyone prepared to dash from the dungeons.

"And Potter?" Snape called after Harry before he could make it to the door behind Ron and Hermione. "You might think about studying harder if you want to pass." He paused, peering at Harry from the curtain of dark hair. "By the way, another five points from Gryffindor for name calling in my class."

### 3. Furthering of the Dreams

The days drew on and before Harry could blink an eye, they were already two weeks into the first term. Sunday was drawing to a close and Harry shut his astronomy book having spent the last half hour gazing at the heavens with Ron, Hermione and the other fifth year Gryffindors.

"Finished?" he asked. Ron yawned and nodded and soon they were heading back down the tower for the boys' dormitory. They had all gotten a late start on homework because of a small ("Just a little do," Fred said as he set up the elaborate display of Filibuster Fireworks) eighteenth birthday party for Angelina Johnson.

Harry felt as if he were moving through water, he was so happily tired. He pulled on his pajamas and slipped into his four-poster. He could feel weariness ease over his mind like a glove. It drew him into slumber before the last lantern was blown out. As he began the limbo between awareness and sleep, he suddenly became very focused on the memory of the series of dreams that had plagued him. The same scene played over and over, and for a fortnight, the events they showed seemed not to progress.

As it was before, Harry was pulled into the world of the underground network of caves again, and this time, he hoped he would see what would happen to his mother. Slowly, his mind began to blur and he regained focus as the same cavern formed around him.

Lily was staring at the creature that stood before her. It was a massive monster, about ten feet tall, conjured completely of stone. For such a bulky mass, it moved with grace and deadly precision. Lily knew the creature was forged from a complicated charm that gave life to inanimate objects and sure enough, a sizable chunk of the stone cavern wall was missing. Without thinking, Lily dived between its legs and stood up, looking frantically around for the sword. The creature charged her and she leaped behind the stone platform as the entire cavern shuddered with old Stony's fury.

"What do you want?" she cried out.

"To eat you," it roared, jumping over the platform, as she scrambled to her feet.

"You too?!" she cried out incredulously, fumbling for her wand. The monster dived at her again. She sidestepped it and ran all out towards the golden sword half covered in debris. Not quick enough.

With a deafening roar, the rock creature seized Lily around the ankles, bringing her crashing to the stone floor. Lily yelled in frustration, as she tried to kick it off. The sword was several feet in front of her head and she couldn't reach it.

"Come on, mum," Harry encouraged, trying unsuccessfully to kick the sword to his mother.

But Lily had her wand out.

"Accio!"

The sword flew to her and she caught it at the hilt. Swinging around, she yelled a stunning charm with her wand plunged into a hole in the creature's face that was barely recognizable as an eye socket.

Infuriated, the rock creature flew back enough for Lily to turn over and bring the sword weakly over her head. In a single swipe, the monster's head came crashing down, rolling several feet away from them. The creature stood up and began to frantically look around for its head, causing large amounts of dust to fall on her as it crashed blindly into the walls. Its head, which lay slightly crushed, was muttering several dirty, medieval curse words.

Lily gasped, looking down at the gold sword in her hand. It had magical significance after all, for no sword could slice through solid stone that easily. The rock creature was still bumping around clumsily. If Lily weren't attempting to flee for her life and complete her mission, she would have found the search quite amusing. Thinking quickly, she took the sword and her wand towards the jade stone that marked the line on the wall. The mark was only about three inches in length—the approximate width of the sword near the hilt.

"Curiouser and curioser," Lily hissed as the mumbled directions from the mashed stone head continued to draw the headless body closer.

"Here goes nothing," she murmured, raising the sword so that the blade was vertical, matched up to the line on the wall. With barely any pressure, she pushed the blade through the rock wall. The green stone gleamed suddenly and began to pulse, though it appeared cool. A bright green began to seep through her closed eyelids and a gold light engulfed her entire body. Suddenly, the cave wall melted away, revealing a beautiful hall, meticulously carved into the rock of the underground cave. The pillars gleamed, intricate carvings of ancient dark wizards and power-hungry lords adorned the walls, and though they did not move like modern day pictures or paintings, their eyes seemed to follow her as she passed them. To add to the hall's uninviting character, its ceiling was menacing, enchanted to reveal a stormy, gray, sky, where lightning cut violently. It lit the hall in harsh white light and eerily transformed the carvings into menacing images. The wall Lily had entered turned solid once more and she pressed on towards a soft gold light that emitted from an entrance at the other end. It was the only welcoming aspect of the underground caves so far. As she pressed on, whispers passed by her ears as if past holders of the pendant were claiming that it was theirs, not hers.

\* \* \*

"Asking the spirits of the dead is a very inaccurate way of learning the future," Professor Trelawney said mysteriously. "Death is not an initiation to the world of Sight."

Ron smirked and turned to hide his face. Harry too, couldn't help but be amused by the spangle-decked woman's musing. This afternoon, he found himself sitting over a board emblazoned by a series of letters and numbers, trying to summon a spirit through a triangle indicator with Ron and Neville. Ron was too busy trying to spin the indicator off the board to take note of many of Trelawney's revelations.

The day had been long and rather gloomy. The sky was gray and occasional rolls of thunder moved through the heavens in the distance. Harry stifled a laugh as the triangle spun off the board and smacked Neville square on the forehead.

"However," Trelawney paused acidly and eyed Harry's table, "they may very well offer insight on future fortunes, current choices...impending doom. The spirits can not be denied their higher observations."

She waved her hands over her own board, which was covered with intricate carvings and made from real mahogany.

"For now we will learn the history of the Spirit Board and why its use, while controversial, can be quite beneficial. We will attempt to Communicate at the end of class."

Harry groaned and leaned back in his chair. Ron was twirling his wand, and Neville looked as if he was having a hard time just trying to look alive. Trewlaney erupted into what promised to be a long, boring lecture, and before long, Ron was snoring.

Harry sighed and stared out at the gray sky, the claps of thunder began to roll over the grounds and it reminded him instantly of the enchanted passageway in his dream. The whispers that had followed his mother began to resonate softly around his own ears.

Surprised, Harry shot from his chair, turning towards Ron to find, with a sinking feeling, he was no longer in his Divinations class, but that very hallway. He turned around and saw his mother several yards in front of him and jogged towards her.

"Hello?" Harry called after her, but she did not turn around or acknowledge his presence. He caught up with her. For a while, he trailed her silently and for a moment, the urge to touch her empowered him. A cold sweat broke out on his brow and his heart began to pound like the night he had watch the reflection of his mother and father emit for Voldemort's wand. But this was different. Lily was so solid before him, so very life like, alive with warm colors that contended violently with the menacing character of the hall. Unable to resist, Harry reached out to touch the young woman's shoulder to see his hand pass right through her.

"She's not real," he murmured, feeling a lump rise in his throat. He wondered if his mind would ever stop torturing him.

With nothing else to do, Harry followed Lily deeper into the hallway and the whispering. The gold light at the end began to grow brighter, and Harry could now make out a pillared entrance. Lily Potter stopped before it and drew in a deep breath, grasping the gold sword and her wand before her. Harry followed her in and stared, wide-mouthed.

They had entered the most lavishly decorated room he had ever seen in his life. It was adorned by beautiful Greek inspired furniture and carvings, Indian silk pillows, and Asian print throws in soft, shiny silk. The walls were adorned with paintings, depicting medieval European countrysides and French castles, all in a circular cavern with black stone floors. It was so lavishly furnished, it seemed nearly cluttered, but it had a bit of beauty in each of its individual decors. In the center of the room stood a short, stone, pedestal where the plainest inhabitant of the room resided.

A flat, rectangular, jade piece on a delicate silver chain, from which the soft gold light seemed to emit, stared back at them. It was of the finest grain, lucid in hue, and absolutely brilliant, without a vein of white to contaminate its shade.

The sword clattered from his mother's fingers. She stepped towards the pendant. Standing before it, she pressed her left hand over the stone muttering softly, pointing her wand at it with her right.

"Excio ad me vox," she said, her voice ringing through the circular chamber. Harry stepped closer and stood next to his mother, staring at the stone beneath her fingers. The jade piece began to glow, then rise, and at last, stopped in midair, appearing to be resting on an invisible throat. Slowly the form of a young girl began to form. Her hair was dark and floated around her as if caught in a wind, and her equally dark eyes peered down at them. But her bare body and features seemed cloudy and undistinguishable.

"The Guardian," Lily murmured.

"The what?" Harry asked shakily before remembering she could not hear him. The figure was speaking and his mother was paying ardent attention to her words.

"Adsuevi exicio ad auditio," the Guardian said.

"Awake to my voice," Lily returned. Harry got the impression it was the translation of the charm Lily had just recited.

"I am awake and listening," the Guardian answered, the English strange from its clouded mouth. Its eyes, the clearest of its features, were penetrating, but seemed completely innocent. Lily turned away, shaking her head.

"How is it you seem so peaceful," she murmured almost angrily, "but your existence has caused so much pain?"

A strange look melted over the Guardian's face as if it did not quite understand.

"The Guardian guards the pendant for those who want power," it replied, though its steady voice wavered as it continued to stare at Lily. "But you do not want power. The Guardian does not understand."

Lily shook her head and returned her gaze back up to the Guardian. Slowly, the Guardian descended from the pedestal and moved so that it stood before Lily, Harry watching both of them from beside his mother.

"I don't want power," Lily replied, knowing that it was the only part of the charm she couldn't master; she didn't have the cold desire for power. "But I have to take you. To prevent destruction." The Guardian gazed at her with an honest curiosity.

"You are with child," it said, looking up at Lily penetratingly.

"Yes," Lily answered. The Guardian was silent for a moment, looking thoughtfully at Lily.

“You fear for your son’s safety.”

“I do,” Lily answered, a bit surprised. “After this, no more putting ourselves in danger.”

Suddenly, the Guardian turned and faced Harry. Harry, who understood he was only an audience within his dream world, felt his jaw drop, shell-shocked.

“Don’t you see your gift to him?” the Guardian asked, pointing at him.

“You can see me?” Harry said completely bewildered. Lily spun around, but found no one.

“Gift to whom?” she asked puzzled.

The Guardian didn’t answer, but lifted the pendent over its head and placed it over Lily’s. It spoke again.

“Adsuevi exicio ad auditio.”

Lily stared at her in amazement. It was easily the most doable task in her mission so far. The spell would be complete. The room began to whirl and the Guardian melted into a flow of liquid light, gliding around Lily, shielding her from view. The Guardian’s voice resounded again.

“You have one desire,” it said. “It is a desire needing power.” And then the light became brighter and Lily grasped the pendent around her neck. The swirling glow seemed to stretch like a living entity, and it slipped around Harry too. He heard the Guardian’s voice again, though it seemed his mother could not.

“I return when darkness rises.”

With that, the light encased them both and Harry gazed bewilderedly at his mother. Suddenly, Lily squinted at him. Harry’s heart caught in his throat. She was looking straight at him.

“Who are you?” she asked before the light faded away and so did she.

\* \* \*

“Harry!”

Harry flinched as his lids snapped opened, finding himself staring at a pair of exaggerated eyes.

“AHH!”

He tipped back in his chair, gasping at the sight of Trelawney’s face. She looked mildly insulted.

Blushing furiously, Harry struggled to release the arms of his chair as several sniggers erupted around him.

“If you and Ron find this too drab to follow,” Professor Trelawney said huffily, “perhaps you two should leave.”

“No, no,” Ron said shaking his head and picking up his quill. Glancing down to find his notes parchment blank, he hastily covered it with his arm. “We just had our eyes closed to...er...better concentrate on the...erm...the—”

“Spirits,” Harry completed hastily, fumbling to load his quill before succeeding in dribbling ink all across the table.

“Really?” Trelawney asked, hardly convinced. “Then perhaps one of you will volunteer for our demonstrations.”

“Be delighted,” Ron replied weakly. Still eying him with obvious irritation, she instead turned and beckoned Harry to stand.

“Perhaps we will ask a more insightful student to help with this example,” his professor said eyeing both boys suspiciously. “Parvati? Care to help Harry out?” Parvati, who was seated nearby, squealed happily and met Trewlaney and Harry who were now standing before the center table.

"Now remember," the spangled woman said airily, "you must relax, and never take the information given without consulting a true Seer—you need not worry this time, as I am here."

Harry groaned as he sat in a chair that was enchanted by Trelawney to pull itself up to the little table that held her Spirit Board. Parvati eagerly took the other chair that had pulled itself up beside Harry's. He sat, but was hardly able to concentrate on the board—instead he wondered if it was time to tell Ron about the strange dreams—but what if they were nothing? Yet, instinct told him, they were more than dreams...something was coming, and its reason was Voldemort's return.

"All right, everyone clear your mind," Trelawney said, sweeping her right hand over her head, as if to wipe away her own thoughts. Parvati let out a breath of air and closed her eyes.

"Now, place the tips of your fingers onto the indicator—concentrate, my children."

Harry and Parvati placed their fingers on the indicator next to the professor's spindly ones.

"Now roll the indicator lightly. Be sure to let it take on its own movements..." Trelawney suddenly stopped talking, because the board was spelling something. Harry could feel the indicator drag rather forcefully over the letter "R". He looked over at Parvati who was staring at the board with mouth agape.

"Is it doing that by itself?" she asked, looking at Trelawney who now was staring at it intently, looking just as surprised by the quick response. Harry wondered if the Divinations teacher was pulling a fast one on them. The indicator shot forcefully to "E". First "R" "E", then T-U-R-N.

"Return..." Trelawney read. The indicator spelt out I-N-F-L-E-S-H. "In Flesh..." as Harry's breath caught in his throat. The words were familiar and he knew where they came from.

"I return," Trelawney continued to read as the board spelt out R-I-S-E-S, "when darkness rises."

Her eyes bulged from behind her jeweled spectacles as the indicator stopped abruptly in the middle of the board.

"I return in flesh when darkness rises."

Harry jumped up from his seat, knocking the little table and its contents to the floor. Trelawney looked up at him in surprise.

"Harry?" she asked quietly, her eyes gleaming with interest. Harry stared at the fallen Spirit Board and shook his head. She touched his arm and he jumped away from her.

"I'm fine," Harry blurted out instinctively, running his hand through his hair, bending down to pick up the fallen board and indicator. "My foot fell asleep."

Parvati, who huffed rather angrily, broke the silence.

"You disrupted the spirits!"

I return in flesh when darkness rises.

They were unmistakably the words from his dream Harry thought, easily ignoring her. What he couldn't decide was whether or not the message was a warning or threat.

"And that," Trelawney whispered, having grown clearly bored with Harry's lack of dramatics, "is why we don't consult spirits to foretell the future, because the messages are simply too vague and often not dependable. I s'pose it's the celestial interference."

Trelawney sighed matter-of-factly, falling against the cushions of her chair. Harry was relieved when he registered the roll of chatter in the class and Trelawney's ignorance. He ultimately decided then that he didn't want to share his dreams, because he had yet to understand them himself. Whatever his parents did, it must have been dangerous. Hagrid had said that they were important in the fight against Voldemort, and his mother in his dream had said that she had wanted to quit after their last mission, because of that danger. It was no secret as well that he had inherited a large amount of sums from his parents, but why had he never known what his parents did for a living?

“Couldn’t stand it anymore, eh?” Ron said, grinning as Harry took his seat. “‘My foot fell asleep’—nice one, Harry.”

Harry forced a smile back and reached for his bag. Class came to an end and he and Ron made their way down the silver ladder back to Earth and reality.

\* \* \*

Tryouts for the Keeper position on the Gryffindor House Quidditch team were in twenty minutes and Angelina had requested that all players show up with broomsticks, ready for a short practice in case the weather didn’t prove too hazardous. Ron accompanied Harry to their dormitory to retrieve his Firebolt.

“Oy, Harry!” called Seamus Finnigan as they reached the bottom of the stairs. He was leaning against a Nimbus Two Thousand.

“Trying out?” Harry asked as they three made their way to the portrait hole. “I didn’t know you played.”

“Always wanted to,” Seamus replied, putting the broom over his shoulder. “Figured getting on the team my fifth year’s better than never getting on at all.” He grinned at Harry and Ron.

“Wonder who else is trying out,” Ron said as they reached the marble staircase.

“I think Dean is,” Seamus said, “reckons he’s as good with Quidditch as he is with his ‘Football’. What about you, Ron?”

Ron scowled a bit. Harry thought it was hardly his imagination that Ron was growing increasingly irritated with Dean. He also noticed Dean tended to turn up wherever Hermione did.

“Haven’t a broom,” he muttered solemnly.

“Harry, Ron, wait up!” Hermione called from behind them. They stopped and waited for her to catch up.

“Sorry,” she said apologetically about not meeting them on the way to Gryffindor Tower. “I was discussing Arithmancy functions with Professor Vector—quite complicated, I fear.”

“Wow,” Ron said flatly, “exciting.”

“It was just such an engrossing discussion,” she said smiling. She opened the front doors and was met by a nasty gust of cold wind. The smile turned into a frown and she added, “Why did I leave it again?”

The sky had darkened dramatically and was heavy with rain. Thundered rolled ominously a few miles off.

“Fantastic,” Seamus said bluntly. “I get to tryout in this.”

“Break a leg,” said Ron, slapping him on the back.

Entering the Quidditch stadium was like Christmas for Harry. Quidditch was something strangely tangible. It was a departure from real life, where the objective was never clouded by complexity. Harry knew the game, understood its parts, and got pats on the back for playing well in a match, not for being the Boy-Who-Lived.

Angelina was conversing with Madam Hooch and the rest of the team was seated on the sidelines. Hermione wished Seamus good luck and she and Ron took seats in the stadium. Dean waved to her and she called out a good luck to him as well before taking a seat. Harry sat down next to Fred and Alicia. A few feet away stood the Keeper hopefuls. There were five total, two were Dean and Seamus. A sixth year by the name of Kaitlin Bixby, a third year named Lara Wong, and a large heavy-set seventh year, Stephen Moore, made up the rest. Angelina turned so that she faced both her team members and the candidates. Her face was stern, and her eyes were aglow with certain excitement.

“Afternoon everyone,” she said, her voice strong and clear over the building wind. “I’m your Captain...” she was interrupted by whoops and cheers from the Weasley twins. She tried unsuccessfully to turn her grin into a look of annoyance.

“Anyway, I welcome back last year’s players and wish luck to those trying out today. We will choose our Keeper after several tests. The results coupled with school histories will determine the best candidate. We will let you know who will be awarded the position at the end of the trials and thank you in advance for your time.”

Angelina opened up the lid of the trunk containing the Quidditch balls and took out the red one—the Quaffle.

“First test,” she said holding up the scarlet sphere, “as you are called, you will mount your broom and fly twice around the pitch attempting to catch the Quaffle me and several team members will be throwing. You will each have a go five times. Bixby! You’re up!”

The wind was getting chilly now and the sixth year climbed onto her broom and pushed off the ground, putting on a burst of speed as she rounded the first corner of the field. With the help of George and Alicia, the red Quaffle was repeatedly tossed through the air as Kaitlin glided by. She dropped the last of the five throws.

“Finnigan!” Angelina called over the roll of thunder. Harry looked up at the sky, a strange feeling rolling in his stomach much like the roar of nature’s fury.

Seamus mounted, flew up into the air and leaned forward on his broom as he took the straightaway. He caught all five throws. The heavy-set seventh year was next, and he barely caught two. Dean was then called and he caught five also. Lara Wong went last, and caught all five easily.

“Next test!” Angelina called as Wong landed. “This time, you’ll have to take on me and my fellow chasers! We’ll call you!”

They went in the same order. Kaitlin did relatively well, blocking six out of ten shots. Seamus blocked all of them, Stephen Moore, the big guy caught, well... Let’s just say a strainer catches more water than he does Quaffles. Dean blocked eight out of ten and so did Lara Wong. Tryouts ended after nearly two hours. Angelina landed and went to converse with Madam Hooch who had the score sheets. As they waited for the results, a burst of lightning lit the skies and Harry shuddered.

“Darkness is rising,” came a female voice from his right. He snapped his head in that direction, finding Fred’s grinning face.

“Something wrong?” Fred asked, the grin falling away at the sight of Harry’s shock.

“Nothing,” Harry said quickly, his face going red. Fred definitely didn’t provide that voice. Maybe it was his imagination, Harry thought as he continued to watch Madame Hooch and Angelina... He hoped that he wasn’t proving Fudge assumption of his insanity correct. But Harry couldn’t shake the feeling that continued to churn his insides: something was going to happen.

Angelina nodded her head and approached her team, motioning the Keeper candidates closer so that she could be heard over the now howling winds.

“First off,” she yelled, grinning, “You all were fantastic. It was a hard decision and I am proud that all of you have shown interest to be on the team—”.

“The best damn Quidditch team—” George interrupted enthusiastically before Madam Hooch cleared her throat loudly. “Heh...” he said sheepishly. “I mean best darn Quidditch team.”

“Anyway, I’ve come to my decision,” Angelina continued loudly, casting him a reproving glare. “Any questions before I announce it?” A huge hand raised by Stephen Moore (though supposedly a seventh year, Angelina seemed suspicious that he may have been on the special eighth year plan) called for her attention. “Yes, Moore?”

"Did I get it?" he asked. Angelina looked a bit pained staring at him, blinking several times speechlessly. Finally, clearing her throat, she forced herself to turn away, continuing on with the task at hand.

"No questions then?" she blurted out hurriedly, "our new Keeper then. Seamus Finnigan."

Polite applause erupted all around and somewhere in the stands Ron was screaming his head off (obviously happy Dean didn't get the position). Another clap of thunder and a lightening bolt ignited the sky. At that same moment Harry was engulfed in the same light from his dream earlier that day. Blindly, he stumbled into George, as a scream ripped through his head.

"Harry!" Angelina cried out. George steadied him.

"Did you..." Harry shook his head, lifting his eyes, finally able to see again. "Did you hear screaming?" He watched as his fellow team members looked questionably at each other. Madam Hooch had forced him to sit back down on the bench. Hermione and Ron were quickly making their way down the steps to the pitch.

"You okay?" they asked breathlessly in unison, pushing past the circle of his teammates.

"Fine," Harry answered loudly, brushing Madam Hooch's hands from his forehead. There was something...wrong.

All of a sudden, the thunder was over their heads and lightening struck the nearby forest. Harry heard another piercing scream and jumped to his feet. Everyone snapped their head toward the sound; they had finally heard it too. It had come from near the edge of the Forbidden Forest though it was hard to tell due to the echoing that resounded around them eerily. Without a second thought, Harry sprinted towards the scream, grabbing his broom and mounting it in mid run. Someone was in trouble. He knew it had something to do with his dreams.

## 4. A Strange Arrival

“Harry!” Madam Hooch was calling loudly after him. “Come down! There’s *lightning!*”

Harry ignored her and flew swiftly out of the stadium in the direction opposite of Hagrid’s hut. Single drops of rain splattered across his glasses as he tried to figure out what he was looking for. Flying low to the ground, he spotted in the distance, a figure stumbling from the Forest in a tangle of dark hair. It seemed translucent, though grew more solid as Harry flew closer.

Finally, the figure fell and laid motionless, a crumpled pile of pale flesh and dark hair. He reached the body, and tumbled off his broom. She laid there, her body completely bare, decorated with a single silver chain around her neck. Without even thinking, Harry ripped off his cloak and wrapped it hastily around the naked girl as he half lifted, half dragged her towards the castle. He stumbled with the dead weight, but carried on towards the distant doors. Rain began a full on assault, and before long, he was drenched.

Finally, Harry made it to the massive doorway, staggering with the girl’s weight as he struggled to drag her up the steps. With no free hands, he stepped back and kicked at the door repeatedly, and as he did so, a small pendent escape from the folds of the cloak he had wrapped around her. It was a piece of brilliantly colored jade. He tore his eyes away from it and continued kicking the door, hollering loudly over the now, full on storm. At long last, it opened.

“Now see here...” Professor McGonagall said angrily, poking her face out, but fell silent at the sight of Harry, carrying a motionless girl, knees trembling, unable to hold her weight any longer. Without even questioning him, she conjured up a stretcher and helped Harry place the stranger onto it. By then, Hermione, Ron, and the other Gryffindors had caught up with him from the pitch. Panting, Hermione brushed her wet hair from her face as Ron thrust Harry’s forgotten Firebolt into his hands.

“What were you *thinking?*” Hermione gasped angrily. Harry shook his head, staring at the girl that McGonagall was examining. Hermione caught sight of her too. “What happened?”

“Harry, you barmy bastard!” George was saying when he was hushed by a look from the Deputy Headmistress. She returned her gaze to the girl and began to propel the stretcher towards the infirmary, following quickly behind it, parting the students like the Red Sea.

“Did she scream?” Ron asked, his eyes wide. “Where’re her clothes?” A murmur went through the crowd.

“Potter!” McGonagall called over her shoulder. “Come on! You’ll need to explain.”

Harry jogged after the Professor, Ron and Hermione behind him. They reached the infirmary and entered through the doors.

“Poppy!” McGonagall called, magicking the stretcher to a nearby bed. “Poppy!”

“What’s going on?” Madam Pomfrey said stepping out from her office. She took one look at McGonagall and the unconscious girl, before sobering quickly. With McGonagall’s help, they shifted the girl onto the bed and Madam Pomfrey began to examine her.

“I’ll be back,” McGonagall said sharply, turning to leave the room. “I need to get the Headmaster. Potter, you stay and tell Madame Pomfrey everything.” She barely gave Ron and Hermione a second glance as she quickly left the hospital wing.

“What happened?” the nurse asked, pressing the palm of her hand against the side of the girl’s face.

“We don’t quite know,” Harry began, looking earnestly at Ron and Hermione as he spoke. “I found her after she sort of stumbled out of the Forbidden Forest.”

“Who is she?” Ron murmured, walking to one side of the bed.

“I don’t remember her,” Hermione said examining the still girl. “Maybe a student?”

"Not a face I remember," Madam Pomfrey murmured. "Ms Granger, go to my office and fetch some pajamas. About your size."

Hermione hurried to the office and returned with the sleep wear. The nurse motioned them back and pulled the curtains around the bed, shielding herself and the stranger from view. Harry ran a hand over his damp face, pushing his wet hair from his forehead. Was the stranger what he was dreading? Or was he meant to find her? Before Harry had a chance to mull over things, footsteps sounded from the halls and both Dumbledore and McGonagall appeared. Madam Pomfrey pulled back the curtains with the girl dressed, a drenched cloak in one hand.

"Whose is this?" she asked briskly.

"Mine," Harry said reaching out for it.

"I don't know her, Albus," McGonagall was saying as Dumbledore examined the girl.

"She may be lost, or—as absurd as the suggestion may be—even a muggle."

"Where was she found?" Dumbledore asked, picking up one of the stranger's bone-colored hands.

"She stumbled out of the woods," Madam Pomfrey supplied.

"Naked," added Ron. Hermione shot him a look.

Dumbledore nodded and returned her hand to the sheets, observing the chain around her neck. He fingered it so that a rectangular jade pendant tumbled into view. He looked at it thoughtfully, turning it over with his fingers. Harry's heart skipped painfully as he watched the translucent, green, stone from his spot at the foot of the bed. It resembled the one that had made a cameo appearance in his dreams.

"No identification?" Dumbledore was muttering, letting go the pendant. "She could very well be a lost muggle, though that seems nearly impossible considering all safe guards we have taken to prevent such possibilities." He paused and ran a hand over his beard thoughtfully. "But then, how did she get into the Forest, and why was she alone?"

Before anyone could answer, the girl's eyes snapped open, revealing deep, dark irises that looked wildly about. She let out a gasp as she fought to sit up, pulling at the sheets wildly.

"Calm down," Pomfrey said soothingly, pushing the girl back onto the bed, but she refused to adhere. She screamed, her hair flying wildly about her face. The pendant thumped lightly on her chest as she struggled to escape the grasp of Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Pomfrey. Harry, Ron, and Hermione watched frozen to their spots, as the girl reached out, eyeing a cabinet behind them.

"Leviosa et num!" she yelled with a chilling fear in her eyes as the items in the cabinet shot from their drawers, levitated in the air, awaiting her command.

"We won't hurt you!" McGonagall said looking from the floating items to the girl's frantic expression. Her wand was clamped tightly in one hand. The stranger tore savagely about until at last, her eyes fell on Harry. For a moment, her body relaxed, but her eyes remained wide, taking him in. Harry felt his blood grow cold as she stared at him, her mouth opened in a surprised gawk.

"Sedatus!" Madam Pomfrey said, having extracted her wand from her apron before pointing it at the stranger. The same penetrating eyes that had fallen upon Harry rolled up into her head and the girl collapsed back onto the pillow. A few feet away, the items from the cabinet dropped to the ground. They were all silent—Harry staring at the mysterious girl in shock, Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Pomfrey holding onto her arms uncertainly, and Hermione and Ron each clutching their wands.

"What—" Harry finally murmured softly, not daring to look away from the now still and silent form.  
"What was that?"

Very slowly, he, Ron, and Hermione turned to look at the mess of cabinet innards behind them.

"All right," Dumbledore said pointedly, shrugging his shoulders, "so maybe she's not a muggle."

"We have to do something," McGonagall said urgently. "This girl could be lost or separated from her family." Dumbledore agreed readily and made for the door.

"I'll go and contact the Ministry about a missing person at once," he said. Then smiling slightly, he looked at the three standing at the foot of the bed, he added "I'm sure they're positively dying to hear from me. Maybe for now, you'd all be kind enough to help Madam Pomfrey clean this mess before dinner."

He bent and picked up a bottle of purple pills, placing them in the cabinet before leaving. After being prodded by Hermione, Harry tore his eyes away from the girl and helped her and Ron clean up the mess, before they were hurried out to dinner by Madame Pomfrey.

They entered the Great Hall a few minutes after dinner was served and were greeted by many of the students falling silent. Apparently, the news of Harry's foretelling of the scream and the unknown girl's appearance had spread like wildfire. They sat down at the Gryffindor table and gradually, conversation started up again, but their expressions remained the same: Hermione's wide-eyed with curiosity and Ron and Harry both knit-browed. Before they could contemplate the girl's arrival, the twins and Angelina slid in across from them.

"What happened?" Angelina asked, her tone full of concern. "What possessed you to just take off?"

Harry shrugged trying to make nothing of it.

"I just heard the scream and followed it," he answered taking a bit of the tender roast beef. "You know, with the storm brewing, I figured someone needed help before it started." Angelina pursed her lips as if that hardly justified Harry's precarious actions.

"You were insane to just fly into lightning like that," said Fred shaking his head. "If you got struck, you'd be well done and burnt around the edges, you know?"

"And how did you hear that girl scream before anyone else did?" George asked quietly, leaning over the basket of rolls. "You know—after you kind of tripped."

Harry was stumped. What had caused him to black out for a split second before the scream? He was saved having to answer by a distraction courtesy of Neville, who had managed to drop and spill an entire platter of pudding on Lavender Brown.

Dinner continued after a bought of laughter (sneering in the Slytherin's case) and Harry led the conversation to Quidditch, which Angelina happily contributed to. She had spent the last few weeks revisiting some old game plans of Oliver Wood's.

"I wanted to start practice desperately today," she began, averting her deep-brown eyes.

"The weather was dead bollocks, though," said George helpfully.

"And really, we wouldn't have gotten anything done with all the excitement of the tryouts, Angelina," Fred added, nudging her in the ribs. "Don't worry though. Next practice, I promise we'll do whatever you tell us to—with hardly any argument."

She grinned at him and nudged him back. You could always count on the Weasley twins when cheering up was needed.

"Believe you me," Angelina replied. "You'll be sorry if you don't." Fred pouted at her and she laughed, her brilliant smile set off by her dark skin.

"Ok, we start practice next week," she said nodding at Harry. "I'm giving you all a break to run the silliness out of your systems."

Dinner ended and they departed for Gryffindor tower, Hermione stopping three times to detangle several third years who were sword fighting with their wands and sending random sparks into the crowd. At last, they reached the common room and after much argument, they agreed to sit down and do homework, ignoring the game of Exploding Snap induced by the twins and Lee Jordon.

"I hate potions," Ron said mournfully, slumping into his chair after an hour of pouring over study packets.

"It's important to know, Ron," Hermione said without lifting her eyes from *Potent*

*Portable Potions.*

"At the cost of our souls to Snape?" questioned Harry. "Really, *you* don't even like potions." Hermione averted her eyes, working her quill in a jar of ink.

"I never said you had to like it," she replied nonchalantly. "Only that you need to know it." She looked up at the two boys thoughtfully before adding, "and I like potions very much—I just can't say the same about Snape."

"There's the evil in you," Ron said smiling mischievously, picking up his own quill.

"The bad you always has something more agreeable to say."

Harry snorted and returned to his own packet, working out the divisions of rat spleen for the Shrinking Potion. They worked in silence for a while until Ron's mind successfully detached itself from studying.

"Who do you think that girl was?" he asked, cupping his chin in his left hand. "She seemed to come from nowhere, you know?" Hermione looked thoughtfully at her packet before looking up.

"She probably got lost or something," she said.

"Yeah," Ron said thoughtfully, "and so did her clothes."

"Enough about her being naked!" Hermione exclaimed. She caught the attention of several boys including Lee nearby.

"Naked?" he perked up in the middle of round five of Exploding Snap. "Who's naked?"

Blushing furiously, Hermione ignored Lee's comment and turned back to her work.

"Hi, Hermione, this seat taken?" Dean said, approaching them and pointing to a seat next to her's.

"Hi, Dean," Hermione replied, peeling her eyes away from her paper long enough to smile him a quick welcome. "Have a seat."

"Sorry about not making the team," Ron said as Dean obliged, though it was anything but sympathetic. His smile was nearly a smirk.

"Thanks," Dean said taking out his own potions packet. "I gave it a go. I'll just stick to football, I guess."

"Yeah, you do that," Ron said, earning himself a reproving look from Hermione.

"So Harry," Dean asked after a moment of silence. "That was pretty crazy today, you flying off and finding that girl."

Harry just nodded. He stiffly answered Dean with as much friendliness he could muster. It wasn't Dean's fault Harry felt bothered by the stranger, but his half of the conversation came out a bit clipped anyway. Finally, after nearly half an hour went by, Harry shut his packet and stood up.

"I think I'll turn in early," he announced, stuffing his things back into his bag.

"But its Friday night," Dean said, smiling at Hermione. Harry shrugged.

"Really, I'm beat."

They said goodnight and Harry trudged towards the boy's dormitories, but was stopped on the stairs by Hermione.

"Harry," she asked, showing her first visible signs of worry since the Quidditch tryouts.

"You are okay, right?"

"Fantastic," Harry said, forcing a smile. He could see she wasn't buying it, and added, "Really, Hermione, I just haven't been sleeping very well, that's all."

She didn't move.

"If you ever need to talk," she said quietly, not bothering to elaborate. It was so very difficult to truly understand Harry Potter, and he knew Hermione understood that he would share when he was ready. She heaved a sigh and glanced up at him. Harry in turn, glanced at the table that was still occupied by Dean and Ron. They seemed to be having an invisible wrestling match. He could just see Ron putting Dean in a mental headlock.

"I reckon those two shouldn't be left alone," Harry said nodding in the direction of the two duelers.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked, glancing their way and looking confounded.

"Absolutely nothing," Harry replied smiling slyly, as he started up the stairs. "Goodnight."

Ron, Dean, Seamus, and Neville filed into the boy's dormitory not long after Harry had climbed into bed. He listened to his roommates silently, hidden by his bed curtains. Neville was explaining the life cycle of a man-eating plant to Seamus, and Ron and Dean were talking passionately on Quidditch and football. Obviously, Harry thought, even a girl couldn't get between a good chat on sports.

"Harry?" Ron finally called softly from the other side of Harry's draperies. "You awake?" Harry didn't answer and he heard Ron climb into his own bed.

Turning over on his side, Harry stared at the back of the velvety curtains, watching as his blurred vision melded the fabric together. Questions built up from all his dreams coupled with the appearance that strange girl barred on him like an oppressing weight. After Divinations, he had wanted desperately to know what his parents had done for a living, to learn their history, to provide a basis in reality that would prove his dreams actual documented moments of his parents' lives. His mind wandered to the girl who was now in the hospital wing. Somehow he felt a vague connection to her, like an old school friend years forgotten. The pendant that had dangled from the mystery girl's neck had repeatedly flashed in his mind and he couldn't help but compare it to that in his dream. It made no sense. How could a girl have any connection to visions that his imagination could have made up? On the bedside table just hidden by the bed curtain was a rolled up letter Harry would mail in the morning to Sirius.

*Dear Sirius,*

*How are you and Buckbeak holding up? I hope you're all right and that you're fine and comfortable with Moony. Though I probably can't prevent it, don't go around risking your neck too much. Anyway, I was just getting to thinking about everything, and it occurred to me I have never known what my parents died for. I mean, other than to save me. You know what I mean. It seems to leave a very empty space in me, and lately I can't help but dwell on that due to some very peculiar...feeling. Otherwise, things are great here. Life has returned to a relative norm, except for an appearance of a girl no body knows. Dumbledore thinks she may be lost, but I feel I know her. Please stay in contact. Hermione and Ron say 'hi', and Hagrid wanted to know if you could send a hello from Beaky. By the way, Quidditch starts up again soon.*

*Harry*

He stared silently into the darkness, hearing the breathing of his fellow dormmates slow as they drifted off to sleep. For now there would be no answers, for even when he fell asleep, no dreams awaited him with clues.

## 5. Not a Drop of a Memory

Through the early morning mist a carriage pulled up to Hogwarts castle, its horseless drive quiet eerie in the solitude. From it, stepped a handsome young man in a black suit, warmed from the autumn chill by a fitted overcoat. His blonde hair moved listlessly in the breeze and his stunning gray eyes jumped from every detail of the castle to a stern looking woman holding open the massive doors.

"Madam McGonagall?" he inquired politely.

"Professor McGonagall," she corrected brusquely. He smiled an apology and followed her up into the entryway then up the grand marble staircase. He refrained from examining the fantastic collection of art and armor as they made their way through several more hallways and stairs. Curiously, she led him to a stone gargoyle that jumped aside to reveal another set of stairs upon her muttered password he didn't catch. In a few dizzying seconds, they reached a door that opened upon its own accord when the woman knocked. The young man entered a handsome circular room with warm wood paneling and a dome ceiling that seemed to be the bearer of the room's light. A very wizened man in flowing dark blue robes stood petting a beautiful red bird with golden plumage. His penetrating blue eyes looked up at his visitors.

"Ah," he said in a gently firm manner, "Logan, it's been ages. It's good to see you again so well. So you're the predecessor of Barty Crouch Sr., correct?"

"Yes, Headmaster" Price replied shaking hands with him cordially. "It really has been too long." Dumbledore moved aside and invited both McGonagall and Price to take seats before his desk. He sat behind it, the lines of his face forming a grave mask.

"Has Cornelius informed you of the matter at hand?" Dumbledore questioned letting the scarlet creature take flight to its perch.

"Yes," Price returned, "a young girl, presumed to be lost is found by one of your students, unconscious having stumbled from the Forbidden Forest. She appears to possess some signs of what appear to be magic displayed in a fit of panic last night, and has been asleep since. When found, she had only a pendant around her neck." He paused in a manner that was no doubt, dramatic. "It seems surprising that you've contacted Minister Fudge, Headmaster."

"I didn't," Dumbledore said shrugging. "Actually I consulted directly with a division in the Ministry that could possibly find the girl's parents. Apparently, Fudge has got me on a bit of a surveillance." Price laughed which caused the stern looking witch beside him to press her already cemented lips tighter together.

"Well," he stated. "You of all people must understand our need to keep tabs on any 'questionable' doings. As for finding the girl's parents in the wizarding world if she is in fact muggle..."

"If in fact she is a muggle?" McGonagall returned rather heatedly, obviously angered by Price's questioning of her judgment. "She said a charm and it abided to her command yesterday evening!"

"Without a wand?"

"Just as we all can do if our mind is focused enough," she replied evenly.

"Highly unlikely," the young man replied smiling.

"Well," McGonagall huffed. "Most of our students must be "highly unlikely" then considering most discovered their own magical capabilities without the aid of a stuffed stick."

"Stuffed stick?" he questioned a smirk flickering onto his face humorously. "Is that an accepted terminology now at Hogwarts for 'wand'?" Dumbledore cleared his throat putting an end to the bickering.

"Anyway," Price continued. "I have a solution: when she wakes, we ask her who she is and where she is from."

"Not that simple, Mr. Price," McGonagall interjected. "She awoke from her sleep late last night after Professor Dumbledore's conference with a missing person's agent and she appears to have no knowledge of who she is. Despite several memory revivers, charms, and spells preformed by our nurse, she did not regain an inkling of her past."

"Oh," Price replied leaning into his chair. "Well, that complicates things a bit, doesn't it?" McGonagall seemed annoyed.

"Have you gotten anything on a missing girl?" Dumbledore asked.

"No report was filed for a girl matching her description," Price answered with a shake of his head. "In fact, most missing persons lately have been adults..." he failed to complete the thought.

"Yes, well I understand that this must be quite a hindering case for you, considering the Ministry and yourself have so much 'public safety' to worry about," McGonagall muttered. The young man chose to ignore it.

"Cornelius has sent a very able man for this...'hindrance'," he replied.

"Are you sure you're able?" McGonagall said, her eyes brightening. That shook up the confident air of the young man considerably. Dumbledore cast a warning gaze at the Headmistress, and huffily, she refrained from adding anything else.

"Do you even know why the Ministry has taken so much interest in one girl?" the Headmaster finally asked Price.

"We are approaching dark times," he retorted.

"I believe that has produced an unnecessary suspicion of all unknowns, yes," Dumbledore returned.

"Well," Price said standing. "Can I at least see the girl? So that I may better assess the situation."

They entered the infirmary and stood by the door. The girl was up, peering into the foggy morning through a tall window in a corner of the room. Madam Pomfrey approached them, rather annoyed that there were visitors so early in the morning.

"She needs to rest," the nurse said. "Can't this continue later?"

"She seems awake to me," Price said, never tearing his eyes from the willowy silhouette. He walked up to her and stood mere feet away, watching the way she didn't blink, eyeing something so far into the distance, that its point was no longer determinable. Price swallowed, and for a moment hesitated. He reached out and tapped her on the shoulder. The girl turned her head, then body as if she were composed of liquid. Upon seeing the face of this stranger, she backed up into the corner and narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

"Hello," he said gently as her stolid face remained hard and unforgiving. "I'm Logan." She stood extremely rigid, as if frozen.

"Give the girl some room!" McGonagall said loudly, advancing towards Price. "You're frightening her."

"How is she?" the young man asked, directing the question to Madam Pomfrey.

"Physically," Pomfrey answered slowly running a finger down a chart she held in her hands, "nothing but a bit of exhaustion. Not surprising if she's been in the Forbidden Forest alone and survived. But her mind, I tried every spell and charm I know, but it seems she's so traumatized that those memories are locked too deep, even for magic." She looked sympathetically at the girl who continued to stare at Price.

"That's a beautiful necklace," he said pointing to the pendant around the girl's neck. She looked down at it then back to him. He reached forward and picked it up, letting the gentle weight of the rectangular stone rest in his palm.

"This looks familiar...where have I seen this before?" he questioned absentmindedly.

"Possibly the only key to who she is," Dumbledore said approaching her and holding out a hand. Hesitantly she took it and allowed herself to be led by the old man, never taking her eyes off of Price, who sought to determine her fate. When she was seated again, Madam Pomfrey handed her a goblet filled with a warm cider, which she sipped while peering at the adults over the rim.

"You can't tell us anything, can you?" McGonagall said quietly.

"She's in a very curious state," Logan said sitting down in a chair near the bed. "There are only so many things we can do with her."

"What are you suggesting?" McGonagall inquired raising an eyebrow over her rectangular spectacles.

"Keep her undercover in a muggle orphanage," he replied. This time Dumbledore rose from his seat.

"You can't do that," he said softly, but the blow was felt. "She is not a muggle, and throwing her out into an environment that is further from understanding her than the wizarding community...what if she were to use magic?"

"I assure you," Price replied from his seat, "we have ways of blocking amateur magical capabilities. Besides, I'm almost positive she's barely capable of performing anything short from a reflex."

"What about last night?" Madam Pomfrey stated. "That wasn't a reflex! She performed a charm!"

"Think of it this way," Price replied calmly. "She has no where else to go. No sane wizard would willingly open up their home to a stranger with so much mystery attached to her. Magical people are actually locking their doors at night, why would they risk locking an enemy in with them?"

"She's a teenager!" cried out McGonagall. "You'd think that the Ministry took in more then risk when they took in you."

"Minerva," Dumbledore said, a bit shocked by his companion's outburst. Price's face paled, but it didn't stop McGonagall from continuing.

"It's not right, Albus," she said shaking her head. "The Ministry doesn't take anything you do seriously-they've sent us our own student-someone we taught who thinks he can do better than you in this situation." The girl looked up at them, blinking curiously. Dumbledore set his lips firmly together, but didn't say anything. At last, McGonagall seemed on the verge of an apology, but Price cut her off.

"Now a days, danger can come in seemingly innocent packages," he said, examining the stitching on his coat.

"And what is another proposed option?" Dumbledore enquired his mild temper stirred a bit.

"Commit her."

"Out of the question."

Dumbledore moved towards Logan Price, who sensed it was time to stand.

"She'll be cared for, her conditioned monitored, why not?" he asked

"She is not crazy," he returned in a low tone, "she knows something, you can see it in the way she follows you with her eyes. Something dire happened to her and putting her in a place that's going to keep her tied to a bed isn't going to make it better."

"St. Mungo's is-" Price began gesticulating with one hand.

"Not a place for a child," Madam Pomfrey shot.

"Then what do you propose to do, Headmaster?" Price exclaimed rather flabbergasted, glaring offhandedly at the nurse. Dumbledore looked at the girl who stared back at him, the arch of one eyebrow slightly raised. There was only one solution he was willing to execute.

"She'll stay here for the time being."

"What?" Price said surprised. "She's not a student! You'd be boarding a charity case!"

"She will be a student then," he said.

"She's not capable, look at her state, she'll disrupt your pupils!"

"She is capable, and if anything, she'll teach us all something...she did survive the Forest."

"This is unheard of!" Price exclaimed rather heatedly. "Pure lunacy! Minister Fudge would not approve of housing a stranger in a school!" He paused and looked a bit flustered before spitting out, "especially this school where letting in a little risk led to the death of a seventeen year old boy!" McGonagall looked as if she could spit poison.

"I have not always done things the Minister approves of," Dumbledore stated solemnly.

Price fumed slightly, his handsome young face contorting with anger.

"I'll show you out," McGonagall said cheerfully.

"I can see you think my judgment is not fit to pass," he said following the practically waltzing woman out the door. He stopped and turned. "But I will bring this up in our next committee. You have her until then!"

\* \* \*

Harry and Ron had slept in and entered the Great Hall after everyone was nearing the end of breakfast. Hermione was seated across from Ginny, who was speaking with Dean. A seat on either side of her was empty. Ron took the seat directly across from Dean.

"Morning," Hermione greeted as they sat down.

"Morning," Harry replied. "Ginny, Dean." Ron's sister blushed.

"Toast?" she asked a bit shakily, handing him the platter.

"Morning, Ron," Dean said cheerfully. Ron remained silent. Harry thanked Ginny and watched as Hermione kicked Ron from underneath the table.

"Morning Dean," he finally grunted and took some toast. Hermione caught Harry's eye and Harry struggled to not grin, shrugging. It seemed obvious Hermione had no idea that Dean was more than just interested in her vast knowledge.

Taking a deep gulp from his goblet of pumpkin juice, Harry took note that Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall were absent from the high table, as well as one amiable half-giant.

"Hurry up, you two," Hermione said, finishing the last of her juice. "I want to go see the mystery girl and give her these clothes." She nodded to the stack beside her, consisting of the school-mandated trousers, blouse, and standard black robes.

"Right," said Ron. "She can't very well wake up with only..."

"Don't say it," Hermione said warningly.

"Pajamas to wear all day," added Ron innocently. She cast him a disapproving look as Harry quickly stuffed several slices of buttered toast in his mouth and drank his cup of tea.

"That's really strange," Ginny, muttered, "you know, how she got here."

"It's a miracle if you ask me," Hermione replied. "She came from the Forest and alone." Ron looked like he wanted to add something but was stopped by Hermione's glare.

"All right," Harry said wiping his mouth hastily on a napkin, "let's go see if she's awake."

They got up just as the food began to disappear from the table, said goodbye to Ginny and Dean and made for the exit when a cold drawling voice called for their attention. Teetering on the back two legs of his chair at the Slytherin table was Malfoy, feet carelessly kicked up on the table.

"I like your hair, Weasley," Malfoy said, sneering as he took in the three.

"Old news, Malfoy," Ron replied testily, jutting his jaw out a bit.

"So, Potter," Malfoy said directing his attention on Harry. "Lucky you. For the only time in your life, you witnessed a nude girl."

"Oh shut up you disgusting trout!" Hermione exclaimed and pushed her way forward.

"Oh, don't be jealous," he called after her, "at least we're all lucky enough you don't stumble around starkers." Crabbe and Goyle, Malfoy's faithful henchmen laughed as they continued to pick their teeth, Pansy Parkinson smirking her agreement.

"Same goes to you, Ghost boy," Harry shot, holding the back of Ron's robes before he could knock the sneer off Malfoy's face. Ron allowed himself to be held back, but as he passed Malfoy's teetering chair, his foot "suffered a bit of a spasm" and collided with one of the back legs. Smirking as Malfoy flailed wildly and hit the ground, Ron turned and followed Harry to the exit. They met up with Hermione who waited outside the doors while Malfoy let out a string of foul curses that earned him a detention from little Professor Flitwick for a fetid display of language.

\* \* \*

Ron knocked on the infirmary door and slowly eased it open. Madam Pomfrey blocked the entrance, standing much like an unmoving door.

"Good Morning," Harry said waving a little. "Just wanted to stop by..." he trailed off at firm look of the school nurse.

"We just wanted to give her these," Hermione interjected. Madam Pomfrey eyed the stack of clothing, her face softening at the act of kindness.

"That's very thoughtful of you Ms Granger," Pomfrey said, stepping aside. She turned to look over her shoulder and shrugged. "I suppose you three could do little to exhaust this patient." Curiously they entered to find both Professor McGonagall and Professor Dumbledore closely following the girl about.

"That?" McGonagall said. "That's a beaker." The girl nodded and moved on, placing a hand on a pair of scissors.

"Ah," Dumbledore said. "Scissors." Apparently they had been at this game for a while.

"Excuse us," Hermione spoke up smiling. Dumbledore turned to face them, encouraging McGonagall to continue the girl's name game. Harry watched as she led the straight-laced woman around the room.

"Nice of you to come visit," Dumbledore said jovially, his twinkling eyes a bit of a contrast to the weary look of McGonagall who was now trying to pry the girl away from the needles.

"She seems loads better this morning," Harry noted.

"She is-in some ways," Dumbledore answered, though a soft note of sadness breached his warm voice.

"Take that out of your nose this instant!" McGonagall suddenly cried out, wrestling the thermometer away from the stranger. Ron raised his eyebrows incredulously, mimicking Harry's curious stare.

"Perhaps we should make some introductions," Dumbledore inserted, saving McGonagall her sanity by leading the girl away from the drawer of scalpels. For a moment, Harry, Hermione, and Ron stared at the girl who had nearly attacked them the night before. Her once penetrating dark eyes now seemed common-place, revealing a sort of bemused expression.

"Er...Hi," Hermione finally managed. "I'm Hermione." She shifted the articles in her arms and stuck out her hand, flashing a friendly smile.

The girl just blinked at her.

"Please excuse our guest, Ms Granger," Dumbledore said kindly. "Whatever she's been through...its done something to her mind; she can't remember anything." He paused and added, "I don't think she even understands English."

"Nothing?" Hermione asked quietly. McGonagall shook her head as Dumbledore reached forward to tap the stranger on the shoulder, gaining her attention.

"This is Hermione," he said slowly patting Hermione's shoulder with his ancient hand. "Hermione."

"Hermione," the girl repeated mimicking Dumbledore and patting Hermione's shoulder.

"Hi," Hermione said, looking a little startled still by the news of the girl's amnesia.

"This is Ron," Dumbledore continued now continuing the process with Ron. The girl copied Dumbledore and repeated Ron's name.

"And this," the Headmaster said upon reaching Harry, "is Harry. Harry."

"Harry," she said brightly patting his shoulder. Despite himself, Harry nearly flinched. He couldn't help thinking about the pendant around her neck. She couldn't be the girl from his dream-it was too absurd. She was solid, real and she couldn't even remember how to speak properly. And though she was stranger, the girl was vaguely familiar-though her appearance was unobtrusive, another face that could have easily blended in with a crowd.

"Oh, I nearly forgot," Hermione said snapping Harry back into reality. "These are for you." She handed the stranger the pile of clothes. The girl instantly snatched them up and unfurled them on a nearby bed, her face beaming with excitement.

"Er...you're welcome?" Hermione said startled, but then the girl looked back at her smiling with what was undoubtedly a very grateful grin.

"Hermione," she said before turning her attention back to the robes.

"That was very kind of you, Granger," McGonagall said her usual clipped tone softening, resulting in the crimson color on Hermione's face.

"She doesn't know anything about herself?" Harry inquired watching the girl lift up the clothing to her nose and sniff. "How she got here? Why she was in the forest?" Dumbledore shook his head, creating silver tides with his beard and mane.

"For now our guess is as good as any," he murmured shaking his head as the girl succeeded in unfurling the robes. "It seems that something very traumatic has happened to her, so that it has buried something much too deep for even her to retrieve. All we can do is hope to familiarize her with daily life, and perhaps stimulate those memories. No charm has worked so far."

"Not even a birthplace, or a name," Ron said softly. In that moment, the girl managed to trap her head within the robes and in her panic crashed into a nearby wall. Harry, Ron, and McGonagall winced as Hermione stepped forward and helped the peculiar girl try on her robes, after untangling it from her head.

"I'm afraid it's not only her past she needs to remember, but how to be a normal human being again," Dumbledore replied watching the girl insert her leg into the armhole of the robe. Hermione patiently helped her with the proper process.

"Have you found anyone at the Ministry that can help her find her family?" Hermione asked showing the girl how to use the clasps on the robes. At that McGonagall huffed. Dumbledore rolled his eyes at her and nodded.

"I have," he answered. "But they are no closer to answers about her past than she is. There is no report for a missing girl and there has been no success in a search for her parents."

"What's going to happen to her?" Harry questioned. For the first time, he realized he didn't want this strange girl to leave, no matter how anxious he was about her.

"Hopefully, she will regain her memory and return to her family," Dumbledore replied softly.

"But what about for now?" Hermione inquired. McGonagall stood up and walked towards the south windows.

"She'll stay here," Dumbledore said. "I think the Ministry and I have come to the conclusion that the best place for her right now is here."

"The Ministry agreed with you?" Ron asked surprised, before reddening brilliantly at the realization of how rude his remark must of sounded. "Sorry." Dumbledore chuckled, waving the apology aside.

"No need to be," he said good-naturedly. "I said "come to the conclusion", not "agree"." Ron grinned and shook his head.

"Hermione, Ron, Harry," the girl was chanting, now successfully in her robes.

"There's not doubt our guest is intelligent," Dumbledore said off-handedly, "she learns things instantly, and has an incredible memory." The girl was now naming every article in the previous name game, nearly a hundred items in order from earliest object named to most recently named. The last one was "robe".

"Is she a witch?" Harry asked and at that Dumbledore gave a rare quizzical look.

"I'm not quiet sure," he murmured. "But there's no doubt she's as magical as any of you." Hermione looked up at the Headmaster curiously.

"But what about that charm last night?" Hermione asked. "She did it without a wand."

"Could be her mounting fright and magic mixed together," Dumbledore replied. "You have all experienced magic without a wand in times you've felt the need greatest." Madame Pomfrey returned from her office with a piece of parchment which she was taking notes on.

"She seems to be completely recovered physically, Headmaster," the nurse said. "But her mind..."

"Will come in time," McGonagall finished.

"Question," Ron quipped. "What do we call her? It'd be a little uncanny to call her, well...nothing." The girl pulled off the robes and tossed them aside, picking up a pleated-skirt that was in the pile Hermione had handed her.

"Ron?" the girl said.

"No," Ron inquired staring thoughtfully at the ceiling. "That name's already taken."

"Let's try this," Harry said, standing up. He pointed to Ron.

"Ron," he stated as the girl raised an eyebrow at him as if he were questioning her intelligence.

"Ron..." she repeated looking at him as if wondering where he was going with this. Harry then pointed at Hermione.

"Hermione," she said. Harry nodded as he pointed to his own chest.

"Harry," she replied suddenly looking a bit offended as if he were questioning her intelligence.

Then Harry pointed to her. The girl just stood there, suddenly dumbfounded. She placed a hand over the pendent around her neck, as if trying desperately to cling to the only thing truly familiar to her. Her eyebrows furrowed, and her mouth moved as if searching for the words. Suddenly, Harry felt as if he knew what to call her: what would suit her.

"Jade," Harry said out loud, surprising himself.

"What?" Hermione asked squinting at him. He was going to retort when he noticed that the girl's hand was no longer clutching the piece of jade but pointing at her chest.

"Jade," she murmured. Then, her eyes brightened and she looked up at them excitedly. "Jade!"

"How, Potter?" McGonagall inquired shaking her head in disbelief. "How did you know?"

"I just..." Harry stuttered, unsure himself as he frantically tried to think of what to say that wouldn't make him sound insane. "I just thought she was particularly attached to that necklace-"

"Jade," Dumbledore repeated thoughtfully. "I find it very suiting, if of course she does." The girl looked up at the Headmaster and grinned. Dumbledore chuckled approvingly. "Welcome to Hogwarts then, Jade."

"I wonder if that's a bit of her own memory," Pomfrey quipped in softly, "or if perhaps she just likes the word."

"Let's not complicate this anymore than it is already," Dumbledore said. "If perhaps you three are not busy, would like to give our newest addition a tour of the castle?" At that Pomfrey positively glared.

"Really Headmaster..." she said glancing sideways at him.

"You told me yourself, Poppy," Dumbledore said grinning rather slyly. "She's fine." Pomfrey finally gave in to the loosing battle.

"But back before lunch," she told them authoritatively. "Professor Flitwick and I are working on a few more memory charms." Harry, Ron, and Hermione agreed, and with the help of Madame Pomfrey and Professor McGonagall, the girl was dressed in the button-up blouse and trousers, an outfit mirroring Hermione's, as the boys had opted for a weekend dress of jeans and sweatshirts. The vest, tie, and robes lay neatly folded on her bed. Harry led the way out of the hospital wing as Pomfrey began to busy herself with several charms books.

\* \* \*

For two hours, they led Jade around the castle, passing a few people who would double back to get a better look at her. It wasn't easy escorting Jade around, as she was prone to examining everything-and not in a careful manner. So far, she had already knocked over four suits of armor and one painting. They had to escape quickly after she managed to unhinge the portrait of Wendalyn the Weird as the witch's furious curses would ultimately bring Filch onto the scene.

From then on Harry, Ron, and Hermione took care of keeping her away from any damageable objects. Curious whispers followed the four, but they weren't interrupted as they found themselves up on high towers, overlooking the grounds. As they entered the hall that led to Gryffindor Tower, the familiar portrait of the Fat Lady swung open and Fred, George, and Lee came tumbling out.

"Greetings," Fred called cheerfully, before stopping so suddenly that Lee Jordan plowed into his back. He stared at Jade stupidly who walked forward placed a hand on his shoulder and said, "Not Hermione."

"Fred, George, Lee," Harry said awkwardly. "This is Jade, she was the girl...you know." Lee recovered first, returning his jaw to his face and grinned affably.

"What's up? I'm Lee," he said prepared to give her a high five. Jade looked at him for a moment, obviously trying to assess the situation, and finally grabbed his hand and shook.

"What's up?" she repeated. Lee looked confused and glanced up at Harry who looked over at Ron.

"Whatever caused her to be in the Forest kind of blew away her memory," Ron said shrugging. "Dumbledore said that she's staying here until the ministry can find her parents."

"Oh, is that all?" Lee said, turning back to face Jade. He demonstrated a proper high five with George. "Now that's a greeting, you try."

"What's up?" she said happily slapping Lee in the palm. They talked for a while in front of the Fat Lady who was stealing curious glances at the girl. The twins and Lee began teaching Jade some phrases that made Hermione huff.

"Prat," George said. "That's someone who acts the idiot."

"Prat," Jade repeated. Harry wasn't exactly sure how much of the conversation she understood.

"Like Malfoy," Ron muttered. "Stupid tusked ferret."

"Stupid tusked ferret," Jade imitated. They talked a bit, with Harry explaining what Dumbledore had said. The conversation drew out for nearly a quarter of an hour before Jade began to grow fidgety.

"What's wrong?" Harry inquired to her after pausing in mid sentence. The newly named girl could only give a sort of pained face as she crossed her legs. She struggled with her mind, figuring out what to do. Hermione was gazing at her with concern and the Weasley twins and Lee stared rather confused. Finally Jade blurted out, "bedpan". Hermione's cheeks turned red as she quickly excused herself and directed the girl down the hall towards the girl's toilet.

"Oops," Ron said sheepishly. "Forgot to show her that part of the castle."

The girls returned a few minutes later, joining up with Ron and Harry and said goodbye to the twins and Lee, and departed down the hall.

"What else do you want to see?" Ron muttered more to himself than Jade. Jade continued to gaze out the windows at the now clear sky, or different moving paintings on the walls.

"How about the Library?" Hermione said grinning, nudging Jade a bit. "The collection is remarkable."

"Oh yuck, Hermione," Ron exclaimed, "she's been unconscious, not dead!"

"Jade no!" Harry said quickly backing up to pull Jade from the threshold of the boy's bathroom as Ron and Hermione continued their debate.

It turned out Ron was fighting a loosing battle and within ten minutes, their route was directed towards the school's library. Hermione eased open the doors revealing, what she believed, to be Hogwarts most prized possessions.

"This is it," she said waving an arm to indicate the endless amounts of books, piled high in beautiful shelves that touched the massive ceiling, framing large windows where light streamed through.

"Not all that and a bag of crisps, if you ask me," Ron muttered to Harry who grinned back at him. Jade however, was entranced. Slowly she walked past Hermione and straight towards the closest towering shelf. There she stood, so still Harry wondered if she were breathing, then hungrily began to pull down heavy volumes and flipped them open in her arms. Hermione joined her and turned her head sideways so that she could glimpse the title on the front cover.

"History of Concocted Potions," she read.

"Sounds like Snape's favorite book," Harry said. Jade shut the book and placed it at her feet and reached for another one, bigger than the first.

"Latin to English: Translated Traditional Spells," Ron read as Jade placed this too at her feet.

"Do you want to check these out?" Hermione asked curiously. The girl just fervently continued grabbing more books off the shelf. Hogwarts: A History, The Reign of the Dark Arts, Mysterious Places of Power, and Important Magical People were added to the now knee high heap.

"I thought she didn't understand English," Harry said, "how is she going to read all these?"

"It looks like the books have sparked something in her," Hermione replied.

"Crikey, look at the time," Ron said glancing at his watch. "Its past one, didn't Madam Pomfrey want her back by now?"

They pried Jade from the bookshelf, hugging the huge load of books to their chest, stumbling under their weight. After a bit of suspicious questions from the librarian, she let the girl check the books out under Hermione's name.

\* \* \*

A few minutes later, they were trudging back into infirmary, loaded down with Jade's books to find Professor Flitwick and Madam Pomfrey discussing charms from several dusty volumes.

"It's about time," Madam Pomfrey said a bit stiffly. "Professor Flitwick and myself have several more memory charms we'd like to try on Jade this afternoon. You'll all have to leave." Jade had already collected her books from the others and made for her bed, dumping the load onto it and immediately began to read. Ron and Hermione seemed a little hurt that the girl failed to acknowledge their dismiss. Madam Pomfrey misread their long faces.

"You can visit her tomorrow, she needs to rest," she said, getting up to hustle them out. Harry looked over his shoulder to see if Jade had even noticed them when all of a sudden she lifted her head. She jumped to her feet, one of the heavy books sliding off her lap and toppling loudly onto floor. With quick steps, she flung herself in front of the door, barricading the exit.

"Now really!" Madam Pomfrey said marching over to them.

"It's okay," Harry said to the nurse before turning his attention to the girl, who was now hunched in the doorframe. In the short time he, Ron, and Hermione had spent with Jade, the uncomfortable anxiety that had poked at Harry before had numbed.

"We'll be back tomorrow, really," he said. She reached a hand up to clutch the green stone that lay against her throat as she acknowledged each of her tour guides with a nod.

"See you, mates," she said, her voice sounding shaky as if it were a piano badly out of tune. It was what George had said as they left the hall in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady.

"See you," Hermione said, a grateful smile blossoming on her face. Ron grinned a good bye and patted her on the shoulder. After Jade released Harry's arm, he waved her a farewell and together the three left.

## 6. A Rise in the Death Toll

Throughout the week, the castle buzzed with the tale of the girl's mysterious coming and condition. The Fat Lady's friend Violet could be seen hurrying from frame to frame, eager to share her gossip. Even the ghosts, right down to Peeves, seemed perplex by the girl.

Through class, Harry, Hermione, and Ron were whispered inquires about the strange visitor and they later finished lunch quickly to avoid the bombardment of questioning from their fellow students. They answered ambiguously, and only let slip that she was suffering from memory loss and would be staying a while. Malfoy had come to torture them but no fight was instigated because of the hawk like eye of McGonagall.

Out on the grounds, it was much quieter. Most of their peers were inside the castle, protected from the growing autumn chill that lurked in the air. They had nearly an hour before their next class (Divinations for Ron and Harry and Arithmancy for Hermione), so their time was spent with hands shoved in their pockets, and scarves knotted extra tight walking towards a familiar hut at the edge of the Forest.

"I wonder what Hagrid's up too," Hermione said as they reached the cabin. "We haven't seen or heard from him since Care of Magical Creatures last Wednesday."

"He wasn't at the high table this morning," Harry said stepping onto the massive stoop.

"That's strange," Hermione mumbled fixing her knitted scarf.

"Hagrid it's us!" Harry hollered knocking on the door. The hut was empty of even the usual excited yaps of Fang, Hagrid's huge boarhound.

"He's not there?" Ron asked leaning slightly to the left to look through a window. There was no fire to warm the one room hut and no light to give glow to the friendly half-giant.

"That's funny," Harry mumbled. "He always lets us know when he won't be here."

"Well, let's go back then, maybe we can ask one of the teachers of his whereabouts in the castle," Ron said crossing his arms over his chest. "It's bloody cold out here!"

"Alright," Harry agreed crossing his own arms against a chilly breeze. Upon reaching the castle, they stumbled into McGonagall who immediately told them off for poking into business she regarded as not their own. Soon enough, it was time for class.

\* \* \*

Saturday had found no Hagrid, though a letter did arrive addressed to Harry from the half-giant, by a large tawny owl that clambered in at breakfast that morning.

*Dear Harry,*

*Just writing from a gorgeous valley in southern England. Here on a bit of a retreat, finding that a nice holiday in nature with Fang is doing us good. Sorry I didn't let you know earlier, it was a bit of a spur of moment sort of a thing. We'll be back Monday night; so don't worry about trying to visit. Tell Hermione and Ron I say hello. See you all in class Monday.*

*Hagrid*

Harry noted that the words, in Hagrid's scrawl-like hand, seemed hurried as if bits and pieces of what Hagrid was really up too fell through the cracks of the letter. Harry shared the letter with Hermione and Ron and they agreed, but any wonderings of their friend's surprise trip seemed a waste of not so trivial time. The letter was unanimously forgotten for the moment as they finished breakfast and proceeded to Potions.

They entered the dungeon classroom ten minutes later, the Gryffindors and Slytherins doing their best to avoid any contact with each other.

“Well, if it isn’t Potter,” Malfoy sneered sliding into a seat several desks away from Harry. “Still the proud processor of that uncanny girl magnet? Any females dropped starkers on your head this morning?”

“It’d be too lucky for you to drop dead, wouldn’t it?” Harry snapped. Malfoy’s eyes narrowed and he let out a derisive laugh and turned away towards the guffaws of his fellow slytherins.

Harry, forcing the irritation down, concentrated on lining up his potion ingredients. His mind began to wander and he thought of Hagrid’s departure and the strange arrival of that girl. It wasn’t until he was prodded by Hermione did Harry notice that more than a quarter of an hour had gone by without the appearance of their potions master.

“When has Snape ever been late?” Ron muttered from the corner of his mouth.

“Week before never,” Harry remarked. Several murmurs rolled across the room as the students curiously eyed each other.

“Where is he?” Lavender spoke up, glancing at the door.

“Had enough of teaching the brainless sort, I reckon,” Malfoy snipped, stepping from his desk to glimpse into Snape’s office.

“So have I,” Parvati retorted crossly. Malfoy didn’t bother to backfire, and instead raised a perplex eyebrow.

“He’s not here.”

The class fell into silence, and for awhile the only sound were the crickets bleeping noisily in their cage.

Not a second later, a loud clatter erupted from just outside the classroom door, followed by a loud “Oof!”. A few more seconds where filled with the sounds of hastily snatched parchments and books before the door was flung open and a young woman with short, curly, blond hair burst into the room, quite out of breath and rubbing her ribs.

“This castle is enormous!” she exclaimed fixing her oblong glasses that fell askew and slightly obstructed anyone’s view of her gray eyes. “It took me an hour to find this dungeon, could you believe it!” She looked about the class and smiled, her pretty, round face awkward on her long skinny body.

“Well!” she said letting out a breath of air hobbling awkwardly to the front of the room, where she let the contents of her spilled attaché case fall from her arms to the Snape’s desk. “Let’s begin! What class is this again? I believe its Potions, if not I’m in trouble...”

“Excuse me?” Malfoy blurted out rudely. “Where’s Professor Snape? And who are you?” He eyed her as if she were a rather unimportant bit of post.

“Oh,” the woman said blankly under her breath, looking as if she were searching for the answer on the top of the desk. “Yes, I suppose I should introduce myself. I’m Professor Darcy Dumont. I’m a magical studies scholar—honors in Dark Arts—it’s what I study not what I do—,” she laughed loudly pounding her hand against the desk, but upon noticing no one else had joined in added “—I was just appointed as a permanent stand-in for your teachers this school year.”

“Why would we need a permanent stand it?” Dean queried.

“Well,” she said brandishing them with a wide smile, “Apparently the Headmaster is expecting many of the teachers to be busy this year with some crucial and exo-scholastic work...however that’s nothing that any of you should be worrying about.”

“Why didn’t anyone tell us?” Ron murmured. Harry shook his head. It was only obvious that teachers like Snape, Hagrid, and McGonagall would be kept busy after the events of last year.

"So today, because Mr. Snape has taken ill, I'll be your potions instructor," Dumont continued pacing about the front of the room. Hermione looked at Ron and Harry, raised an eyebrow and mouthed, "Mister Snape?"

"Snape's ill?" replied Malfoy leaning back into his chair. "That's rich." Dumont turned and eyed Malfoy carefully, her mouth working nervously.

"Quiet possibly he may be on vacation," she muttered, pulling off her glasses in thought. "Yes, or maybe on that crucial work I was noting...well, what does it matter? He's not here! Let's begin!"

The slightly off woman exuberantly answered their questions on the O.W.L study packets. As questions were asked, she dashed about, bewitching bits and pieces of the classroom to perform examples. She also had them dizzy with mass equations she scrawled across the board, before accidentally sending a cauldron through a window. The class ended with many of the students eyeing the substitute Professor from beneath tables and behind chairs, wondering if they could possibly survive her.

"That was.... interesting," said Harry as they made for Charms.

"To say the least," Ron added bluntly.

"She's a bit..." Hermione began, but failed to finish

"Looney, mental, nutters, a few twigs short of a broomstick?" Ron filled in, and despite herself, Hermione sniggered.

\* \* \*

By Thursday, Snape had yet to return. That morning, Dumbledore formally introduced Dumont to the school and made the announcement that she would be acting as a permanent stand-in lecturer. He had noted Dumont's extensive background and studies with Dark Arts and magic at which Harry snorted.

"I was thinking the same thing," Ron muttered.

"She looks like a dark *color* could do her off," Harry whispered back, "much less the dark *arts*."

Harry never thought he'd miss Snape, but at least with the greasy haired Potions master, they got some sort of lesson through. Dumont may have been the genius Dumbledore praised, but she was also an awkward scatterbrain who was often in need of a road map to get out of her own thoughts. On demonstrating levitation potions, she successfully blew up her cauldron and most of its contents, spraying several Slytherins with the batch.

"Well," she said, scratching at her now charred and frizzed hair, "I reckon adding two tablespoons of newt wasn't right. Well, I didn't say I specified my studies in potions..." Hermione hung her head into her empty cauldron, and sighed in ultimate defeat.

"I'll never make full marks at this rate," she said dejectedly, her voice echoing in the empty pewter tub. Hermione had gone from amused with this new professor to down right panicked by her competence in the span of two lessons.

"Not to worry," Dumont exclaimed, fixing her skewed glasses. "I can fix it!" Everyone took for cover.

"Let's see..." she muttered, raising her wand. "Fix-o...wait that's not a spell...silly me! That's a name brand of super glue! Oh well." Just then the bell rang, and quickly, everyone made a dash for the door.

"Well," Ron said brightly as Hermione stiffly walked up the stairs with furrowed brow, "at least your cauldron's still intact."

\* \* \*

After forcing down several more pages of the transfiguration O.W.L packet (with Hermione still rather ruffled by Potions with Dumont), Harry insisted on a walk to Hagrid's hut. Jade joined them and fiddled amusedly with the striped scarf Ginny Weasley had given her. They exited the massive front doors, Hermione still slightly peeved by their wandering minds.

"Cheer u, Hermione," Harry said exasperatedly. "You've got to be curious about Hagrid enough to put off a little studying." Hermione sniffed as Jade raised an eyebrow at her.

"He's got a right to his privacy," she returned in attempts to show no interest. "I'm sure Hagrid would understand that we have to teach ourselves a whole chapter of potions."

"Maybe he'll spill the beans on where he's been all weekend," Ron said choosing to ignore her last statement. He squinted a bit in the bright autumn sun as they made their way towards Hagrid's hut, Jade in tow, who gazed around dreamily towards the lake.

"I hope so," Harry replied, stuffing his hands into his pockets, before turning to Jade, "you'll love him, he's all heart... and part hairy suits." Jade smiled blankly at him, completely oblivious to his words.

They approached the familiar cabin, spotting Hagrid bending over a wooden pen outside, several feet behind his house. He seemed to be cooing and making baby noises at another one of his "lovable creatures".

"Hi, Hagrid," Hermione called, forgetting the study packets at the sight of Hagrid's warm smile. Hermione suddenly slowed her pace at the sight of the pen.

"All right, Hermione? Hi there Harry, Ron!" Hagrid exclaimed happily standing up to his full towering height. He looked a little fazed by their company, and for a moment, set his lips into a line so thin, it rivaled Professor McGonagall.

"Yeh must be Jade," Hagrid finally said, putting the usual warm smile back on his face.

"Dumbledore's told meh a lot about yeh." He reached out and shook Jade's hand, making her head bobble.

"What's up?" she asked grinning. Hagrid laughed stiffly, and turned away, hastily grabbing some feed for whatever creatures were hidden by the wooden fencing. Harry's brow furrowed, but before he could say anything, Ron broke in.

"Did you have a nice holiday?" he asked from a considerable distance. Hagrid furrowed his eyebrows looking a bit confused.

"A holiday?" he asked rubbing a hand over his wiry beard. Then he chuckled and shook his head.

"Oh, yeah, right, meh *holiday*. It was great, taking in that beautiful southern green'ry, though it's a bit damp an' chilly this time o' year."

Suddenly, a happy whining issued from the open cabin door several yards away. Fang, Hagrid's boarhound came bounding out with tongue happily lolling from the side of his grinning mouth.

"Hi, Fang!" Harry laughed as Fang knocked him to the ground, adorning him with a bunch of slobberly kisses. "I missed you too." The happy hound took note of Ron and Hermione and wasted no time in covering them with affection. Jade had retreated behind Hagrid.

"Naw," Hagrid said jovially. "Fang's just a big kitty cat, go on." He nudged her towards the hound who howled in delight at the prospect of a new friend and began to cover her in slobber too. She was laughing and trying to hide her face, while at the same time attempting to pet the animal.

"Fang!" Jade cried out happily as the dog licked her face. She turned to look at his huge, furry mug and before anyone could stop her, licked his head.

"Urrggh!" she spit furiously, using her scarf to wipe her tongue.

"Did she—Did she just lick Fang?" Hagrid asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I know I shouldn't be surprised..." Harry answered grimacing as Jade rubbed a robed forearm repeatedly across her tongue.

"Er...how'd Fang enjoy the trip?" Hermione asked as Jade finally approached the dog again.

"He liked it enough," Hagrid said calling Fang over and patting him on the head with his massive hand. "Spent most of his time chasin' sheep and getting' his belly scratched by Olympe..." Hagrid caught himself, grew pale before blushing furiously.

“Olympe? As in Madam Maxime?” Harry asked with a grin, remembering the smitten affections between the French school Headmistress and Hagrid. “What were you doing with Madame Maxime?”

“Both taking time off from school duties for some.... time alone, eh?” Ron added, absentmindedly leaning on a side of the pen. Hagrid fumbled, crossing, then uncrossing his arms against his chest.

“Sumthin like that,” he said nodding his head. His forehead was beat red now.

“Nothin’ at all...I mean it’s harmless at that, I mean not harmless at all...” then he straightened up in an attempts to bring in the reigns of the conversation. “Now see here you three, meh personal business ain’t nothing of yer concern.” Hermione stifled a giggle as Jade stared at her curiously. Harry grinned slyly at Ron, who shrugged his shoulders against the pen, apparently forgetting what they were fencing in. A little yelp reminded him that he was leaning against an enclosure full of unknown creatures.

“Hagrid, what are those?” he yelled as one creature flung itself against the barrier. Ron leaped away from the pen, while attempting to play his panicked move off as suave. He stared wide eyed at the swarm of peculiar bodies that resembled large spiders except they had a crab-like mouth instead of fangs, and marched on four legs sprouting from a single smooth, round, body. They made soft yelping noises as they marched over each other, all the size of small lap dogs. Hagrid beamed and Jade moved towards the pen, peering over the side.

“Sweet aren’t they?” Hagrid sighed, lifting one out to show them. “Beautiful all shiny and silver, and their coats are soft as silk an’ all. Want to touch it?” Ron hastily retreated behind Hermione, who eyed him from over her shoulder, though she looked no surer of the creature’s beauty than Ron.

“But what *are* they?” Ron asked again.

“Silk Morders,” Hagrid said proudly kneeling beside the pen again. “Harmless they are, and they produce some of the softest silk known to the magical community. They’re just tiny babies of course, not making silk yet.”

“Our lesson today?” Hermione inquired nervously. Hagrid nodded happily.

“That’s right, an’ for the rest o’ the year. You’ll be raising ‘em, then you’ll be graded on the how fine the silk they produce is.” Winking, he added, “On top of that (if ya care for them right, that is) you’ll be able to keep the soft stuff too.” Hermione smiled, though it wavered a bit as she looked at the morders in their squirming mass.

“Not dangerous, right?” asked Harry stepping up to get a closer look at the strange creature in Hagrid’s hands.

“Not really,” was Hagrid’s replied. “Can be if you provoke ‘em. They’ve been known to encase wizards in silk so strong only an incineratin’ charm could get them out. This one’s wanting to be put back now.”

“And okayed by the Department of Magical Creatures?” Ron added.

“First thing I got done.”

Hagrid gave the squirming creature one last pet just as Jade quickly reached in and picked up one of them for herself. It squirmed in her hands as she set it down again, snorting with laughter as the morder rubbed up against her hand.

“There, see?” Hagrid said. “Harmless.” Hagrid was then reminded of something and stood, furrowing his brow sternly. “Speakin’ of safety, I heard that you—,” he pointed at Harry who’s eyebrow’s rose to meet his hairline, “—deliberately flew in lightning, yeh coulda been killed!” Harry was a little taken aback.

“You can’t always be the hero, Harry,” Hagrid continued shaking his head disapprovingly, his bushy beard bristling a bit. “I know ya found her—” at that he paused and looked over at the girl apologetically, “—an’ all, but riskin’ your neck recklessly...that was plain idiotic of you.”

"I just..." Harry began in attempts to produce a valid reason for his recklessness. How could he explain the strange call to find the girl? It was a feeling that was placed beyond the grasp of words considering he felt so linked to her presence...for awhile he was even nervous by it.

Hagrid looked hard at Harry, before softening and sighing, returning his gaze to the morders.

"What's done is done," he said. "Just no more recklessness, 'right Harry? 'Specially not now...we don't know who's our enemy and who's our friend.'" Ron, Hermione, and Harry glanced curiously at each other at Hagrid's remark. The half-giant looked down at Harry expectantly and Harry finally agreed, returning the smile Hagrid gave.

"So what about you?" Hagrid said quietly to the girl who was still watching the morders happily.  
"Hear you're a bit o' a myst'ry...can't remember nothin'." Jade just ran a hand over a passing morder.

"Nothing, and she doesn't talk most of the time," Ron replied. "She's not the greatest conversationalist, but she's smart I think. She reads a lot in any case...I'd say she's been contaminated by Hermione." Hermione raised her eyebrows at him as if daring him to say more.

"She's probably been through something extreme," Hermione informed Hagrid ignoring Ron's rather satisfied smirk, "at least that's what Madam Pomfrey thinks. They can't revive any of her memories."

"Yeah," Harry added, "Professor Dumbledore said she's staying here until the Ministry can find her parents." Hagrid looked a bit sour at the mentioning of the Ministry.

"The Ministry's has a hell of a job with this Dark Arts business," he said frostily, "they're to busy for anyone that isn't *important* enough. All because they wouldn't listen in the beginnin'..." They fell silent watching the morders.

"Its good you're keeping her company though," Hagrid finally said. "Everyone can use a friend."

\* \* \*

"Today, we will begin with the first lesson of many in learning how one transfigures one's self," McGonagall said peering at her classroom from over her spectacles. There was a roll of excited voices but McGonagall quickly hushed them.

"However I need first your promise that these lessons will be taken seriously, with the utmost maturity." A chorus of agreements and nods answered her.

"Now you are not learning to be an animagus, that takes years of extensive practice. You will use your wand and by your seventh year, manage at least partial transformations. That is not illegal, unlike being an unlisted animagus."

"Unlisted Animaguses," Ron muttered.

"*Animagi* is the plural for Animagus Ron," Hermione muttered. Ron stuck out his tongue at her but said no more, as McGonagall had just transfigured herself into a cat and back.

"Now, has anyone ever wondered what happens to the animigi's clothing or personal articles?" McGonagall asked when she was in human form again, back in her black and emerald robes. Suddenly a very funny thought occurred to Harry. If Sirius didn't master this part of being an animus, he would not only be accused of murder but of indecent exposure.

"For today, our first lesson is transfiguring either a watch, ring, or bracelet on your hand or arm into your own skin," McGonagall was saying. "Most of you probably won't get this by the end of the lesson, but hopefully you will all master it in a few weeks." With that she began to lecture and Harry and Ron's focus began to wander as they engaged in a thrilling muggle game of Hangman.

The class was nearing an end and they had all broken up into groups to attempt the new lesson. Parvati looked quite pained as she tried to pick out which one of her bangles to sacrifice, and Neville crashed to the floor as he accidentally transformed his watch into a ball and chain. Harry and Ron watched contently, not bothering to hide their amusement.

"Honestly," Hermione said, getting their attention, "you two can at the least try."

"We will," Ron replied, "as soon as everyone has messes up first."

"Ouch," Harry said wincing as Seamus's wand over shot and transfigured Dean's tie into a thorny rose bush. "I reckon that didn't feel too good." Ron seemed rather pleased by that. Hermione sighed and turned her attention back to her own attempts.

"*Particus*," she said, aiming her wand at her watch. It appeared to have vanished. McGonagall approached her, smiling happily.

"Look everyone!" she exclaimed. "Ms. Granger has done it, and nearly perfectly. Five points to Gryffindor!" Hermione was blushing furiously, but happily. Prompted by McGonagall, Hermione repeated the spell several times as her peers watched, oooing and awing.

"Would anyone else care to give it a try?" McGonagall asked the crowd of students around her. No one volunteered. She peered back at Ron and Harry who had comprised Hermione's group, raising an eyebrow expectantly. Harry and Ron frantically looked at each other.

"He wants to," they said in unison pointing at each other.

McGonagall sighed, but the slightest hint of a smile played quickly across her lips...or maybe it was a tick, Harry wasn't sure.

"Let's see both of you give it a go," McGonagall said placing her hands on her hips. "You first, Mr. Weasley." Ron scowled, rolling up his sleeve and looking over at Hermione as if he blamed her for his predicament.

"*Particus*," he said, pointing his wand at his wristwatch. Surprised, he did a double take, as the watch camouflaged itself against his skin. It wasn't completely gone like Hermione's, but he was closer than anyone else in the class had been. McGonagall nodded approvingly.

"It seems you're studying a bit harder lately, Weasley."

"Oh," Ron said snapping out of his disbelief. Nodding vigorously, he dryly added, "absolutely."

"Potter?" McGonagall's eyes had now directed themselves onto Harry. Harry gulped nervously. This is what he got for not paying attention. He rolled up his sleeve and pointed his wand to his watch.

"*Particus*," Harry said. "Er....*Particus*..." Nothing happened. The watch was as visible as ever on his wrist.

"It didn't work," he said nervously as he looked up and found the class staring at him wide-eyed. Suddenly, a snigger burst from Ron, followed by a roll of soft laughter. Harry, bewildered, stared back at the class with mouth agape.

"What?" he asked a bit panicked. "Ron, what is it?" Ron was a brilliant shade of scarlet from laughter and couldn't bring himself to answer. Hermione had a hand fixed over her mouth.

"Harry," she managed after removing her hand from her mouth and clamping her eyes shut. "Your clothes."

Absolutely dumbstruck, Harry stared down at himself to find he was in his shoes, black socks, and...broomstick-print boxers.

His robes were gone, yet he still felt as though he had them on and for a moment all he could do was stand there, clad in his boxers and socks, wand pointed at his watch. Going red in the face he jumped behind a nearby desk.

"Just say the counter spell, Potter," McGonagall said impatiently as she attempted to restore order in the class. Hermione was going red, trying not to laugh out of respect for her friend as Ron howled with glee, while making attempts to drag Harry out for another look. Given anything sharp, Harry thought he could have killed Ron...actually, given *anything*, he thought he could have killed Ron.

As if things weren't bad enough, Harry couldn't remember the counter spell. Hermione, sensing his panic, threw a hand over her eyes and bravely leaned over the desk.

“Harry,” she whispered. “It’s *reparticus*.” Harry shut his eyes and pointed his wand at himself.

“*Reparticus*,” he said concentrating on robes. He carefully opened his eyes and looked down, relieved to see his uniform and robes visible again. Taking a deep breath, he mustered what was left of his battered dignity and stood up, still utterly red in the face. The laughter died down, and Seamus slapped Harry on the back. Hermione looked as if she was going to suffocate, hand still firmly clapped over her eyes. McGonagall had a look of both exasperation and approval.

“Despite the fact that you did not conceal your watch, Potter,” she said sternly, “you transfigured your clothing seamlessly to your body. Advanced for this stage...though a little over zealous.” Ron snorted and sat down next to Harry.

“Nice shorts, Harry,” Lavender said as she passed. McGonagall cleared her throat and Lavender quickly took her seat. The stern old woman looked down at her students through her spectacles, hastily thanking her volunteers before returning to the blackboard to put up the homework.

“It could have been worst,” Ron whispered grinning, as he nudged Harry in the ribs. “You could have been a little over zealous about your underwear, too.” Harry grinned back and when Ron turned to retrieve a bit of parchment from his pack, he pointed his wand at the vivid red hair and whispered, “*particus*”. Ron’s hair seemed to vanish as he returned to his straightened position.

“I expect this assignment to be completed by...” McGonagall paused, halfway turned around, staring at Ron. “Weasley?” Ron looked up from his notes, surprised.

“Yes, Professor?”

“Where is your hair?” she asked flatly. Ron’s eyes widened.

“My what?” he asked blankly. He ran a hand over his head, and felt his hair, the same as ever. Sniggers where escaping from everywhere and Parvati handed Ron her compact mirror, as Hermione shot Harry a look that practically exclaimed, “honestly!”. Ron took one look.

“ACK!”

\* \* \*

After receiving a lecture from McGonagall about maturity, class for the day was dismissed and they made their way out into the hall, Ron stopping every time he saw a reflective surface. His hair was returned to its normal glory, but he just had to make sure.

“That wasn’t so friendly,” Ron muttered giving his hair one last brush to return the stylish flip in the front. “Why’d you do that for?” he asked. Harry grinned.

“For not attempting to help me out in my time of need,” Harry replied. “See if I’d ever help you if you get stuck in your knickers.” Ron grinned.

“Well worth a few moment’s baldness,” Ron replied. “That was classic, Harry.” Harry kicked Ron’s backpack and laughed, then glanced over at Hermione.

“Thanks by the way,” he said. She shrugged going red once again making valiant attempts to hold back her amusement for his sake.

“Oh, I see,” said Ron, “you’d help Hermione if she got stuck in her underwear—” he stopped himself and his face turned a brilliant magenta. He never finished his sentence as he suddenly found the carpeting far more interesting. Hermione raised an eyebrow.

“I hope never to find myself in that sort of predicament, Ron,” she said tightly. “Besides you could be a little more sensitive about what happened to Harry.” Ron recovered, then pretended to look hurt.

“Are you calling me insensitive?” he asked flabbergasted.

“That was probably really embarrassing for him, right Harry?” she asked, not looking at Ron. Harry felt his cheeks burn at the mere mention of his “free-show”, but despite himself, chuckled.

"Yeah, but it was funny too, and you've got to admit the balding thing was slick," Harry said, turning to Ron who agreed whole-heartedly. Hermione muttered something indistinguishable about twisted male bonding rituals.

\* \* \*

On their way to breakfast the next morning, Ron and Harry stumbled into their favorite person.

"Morning Scarhead," Malfoy said from his lazy position, leaning against a wall. "Weasel."

"Hi there, ferret king," Ron returned nonchalantly. His eyes, however, were alight with glee as he remembered the day the Professor Moody imposter had transfigured Draco into the white rodent. Malfoy snorted angrily.

"Did you hear, Potter?" Malfoy drawled heatedly. "An innocent family was murdered in their home on Monday along with two former Death-Eaters. Just thought you'd like to know what your antics last year has brought everyone." Harry swallowed hard feeling the blood begin to pound in his ears. Before either he or Ron could react a voice nearby echoed through the hall.

"Layoff or get a tan," Cho Chang said making her way towards them. Harry felt his stomach flop knowing that she was forced to hear a reminder of Harry's involvement with Cedric's death last year. Malfoy grinned maliciously.

"You know Chang," he replied standing up so that he towered over her, "I would have figured you'd agree with me on that one. If it wasn't for Potter, your boyfriend would still be stealing away to romantic nooks with you." Cho's pretty face grew cold, her jaw clenched so that a vein was visible, throbbing in her jaw.

"I usually don't agree with dirt, Malfoy."

"Is everything all right here?" Dumont had appeared, holding several slices of toast in one hand and a pile of disorganized papers in the other.

"Peachy," Draco replied flatly. He forced a smirk then walked away. Dumont nodded to them before turning to start away.

Cho seemed to hardly notice the professor. It took a moment for her cold glare to melt away as she watched Draco's form fade from view before she turned to face Ron and Harry.

"You're not taking anything that rat says seriously, right?" Cho asked Harry. He felt his throat go dry as he noticed her misting eyes. It was the first time she had spoken to him since last year.

Cho swallowed then blinked several times. "Don't take anything anyone says, they don't know."

Harry shifted uncomfortably as the guilt that had haunted him all summer came crashing over him once more. He wanted desperately to run away from the sincere face before him.

"Thanks," he managed thickly, though it hardly felt like the right thing to say. Cho smiled, motioning them towards the Great Hall.

"Anytime," she replied, "next time Ron can punch him in the nose while I go for his shins." She laughed and Ron and Harry joined in nervously. It was enough to relieve Harry, however, if only momentarily, of the debilitating guilt. The stomach-dropping feeling, however, had yet to subside.

"So how is Hogwart's newest addition?" Cho asked changing the subject and inquiring about Jade. "Has she remembered anything?"

Since Jade arrived in that uncanny matter a few days ago, the rumors had been flying high. It seemed not one person was unaware of her.

"Just her name," Ron replied. "After a panic attack and a game of mental 'Guess Who?' with Harry, we've figured out her name is Jade. But besides that, she can't remember anything."

"And did she survived being in the Forbidden Forest?" Cho asked in awe.

"That's where she came from," Harry said forcing himself to take control of his vocal cords. Cho smiled at him, and Harry felt his legs turn to water.

"I heard about what you did, risking your neck in lightning without a protective charm," she said turning away. "Pretty stupid. But it was brave of you."

Harry felt his lips form a lopsided grin and the blood swim into his face.

When they reached the door to the Great Hall, a figure dressed in black pushed through them rudely.

"Move Potter!" snapped Snape. It was the first time any of them had seen the potions master in a week. "I need to speak to Dumbledore." They looked at each other and shrugged, before making their way into the Hall. Malfoy had already taken his seat; he had apparently taken a different route to the Great Hall to avoid another meeting with them.

"What was Malfoy talking about?" Harry asked Cho and Ron. "Were there more murders?" Cho looked distant.

"My mum sent me an owl telling me that a wizarding family was killed in their manor along with two former Death-Eaters." She paused thoughtfully. "Justin told me that their bodies were suspended in the middle of Squire, a small wizarding square in southern England." A few of her friends waved to her from the Ravenclaw table and she began to walk in that direction.

"I'll see you around, bye Ron, bye Harry," Cho said walking backwards, then added, "it's not your fault...what happened to those people, or ...you know." Harry smiled at her back, but it quickly fell as he thought of the news he had just received. He and Ron reached the Gryffindor table and sat on either side of Hermione, who had saved them seats.

"What took you two so long?" she asked, pouring some cream into her porridge.

"Pass the toast, Ron?" Dean asked pleasantly.

"Good Morning, Professor!" Ron said loudly ignoring Dean's request as Professor McGonagall approached. She raised an eyebrow as she handed out a notice to each of them.

"What is it?" Hermione asked peering over Harry's shoulder as he flipped it open.

"Defense of the Dark Arts is now on the schedule...after potions," Harry murmured after reading through the notice.

"Fantastic," Ron muttered. "Dumbledore actually got someone nutters enough for the job."

"Yeah," Dean attempted again, "can you toss me some toast?"

"I wonder who it is," Harry muttered. Ron nodded, disregarding Dean.

"Dunno," Hermione replied, flipping the parchment over. "It doesn't say." She grew silent, dropped the notice and pressed her hands together, eyes drawn heavenward.

"What are you doing?" Ron asked curiously.

"Praying that I'll learn something," she replied without missing a beat and returned to her pumpkin juice.

"Just like you to think of 'learning' in a time of crisis, isn't it?" Ron muttered.

"Snape's back," Harry said matter-of-factly. "He pleasantly bowed us in."

"Wow," Hermione murmured. "Must have been nearly dying if he was out for a week." Suddenly Ron groaned, turning his back on Dean who gave up on the toast.

"You don't think...."

"What?" Harry and Hermione asked in unison.

“That Snape could be our new Defense teacher...” Ron looked green from the mere thought of it. “I mean he was gone...Defense was postponed...now he’s talking to Dumbledore...” Hermione cleared her throat and returned to her pumpkin juice.

“No, that’s silly, Ron,” she said. “You’re worrying yourself over nothing.”

“Hermione,” Harry said pushing a sausage around his plate. “He *has* been after the job for four years...you don’t think that maybe...just maybe fate would be on his side for this one?”

“I don’t think you two should be jumping to conclusions,” she snipped. Harry glanced up at the high table; Snape was now seated next to Dumbledore speaking in hushed tones. Hermione huffed and unfolded her copy of the *Daily Prophet*.

“He can’t teach two classes...” added Hermione, though her voice seem to break a bit. “I mean, that’s just too *pleasant* for him.”

“Hermione,” Harry stated. “That wasn’t very convincing.” Ron sighed taking note of the Wizard newspaper in her hands.

“Did you hear about the murders?” Ron asked, pouring himself a steaming cup of tea. Hermione looked up at him.

“That’s all I’ve been hearing about this morning,” she said, skimming down the front page. “I figured the Ministry would have gotten a handle on this.”

“Apparently not,” Harry said rather sardonically. A sudden burst of wind grazed their faces as a flock of owls flew to their owners, bearing letters. Hedwig fluttered gracefully down onto Harry’s shoulders.

“Hedwig!” Harry exclaimed, petting her gently as he took a letter from her. She ruffled her feathers appreciatively and hooted. He gave her a few bits of bran flakes and she contented herself by nibbling from his hand as he read the letter.

*Dear Harry,*

*By now, I’m sure you heard about the murders. It was Voldemort Monday night that killed that family, why no Dark Mark, I don’t know...maybe he just wants to terrorize a bit more. I need you to promise me to be extra careful this year. I’ve already requested Dumbledore to not permit further visitations to Hogsmeade (I really hate being the bad guy). I’ll write when time permits.*

*Sirius*

*p.s.: Let’s wait till we can talk about your parents.*

*p.p.s.: Be careful around that girl.*

“What does he mean, “be careful around that girl”?” Harry asked out loud. Hermione shrugged, rather perturbed.

“You don’t think that he thinks Jade’s dangerous?” she asked curiously. “Just because she has no memory.” Ron changed the subject by nodding towards a piece of paper that had fluttered onto Harry’s plate. It was an enclosed clipping from the Daily Prophet. So Malfoy was right. Harry read it out loud softly.

## **Six More Dead in Squire, England**

*Sir Greigus Donahue, his wife, and their grown children Catherine and Blake were murdered in their manor sometime this week. Their bodies were found buried among Mrs. Zelda Donahue's beloved garden. The mansion was found in perfect order, though the servants were gone and much of the food was missing. It is believed that Rowanda and Zechariah Whitman, two former Death-Eaters, were also killed in the Donahue's home, before they were apparated ten miles north and put on display in the village square of Squire. Though rumor has it that this is indeed the work of the infamous, You-Know-Who, the Ministry of Magic's press spokesperson and head of Matters Abroad, Logan Price has insisted that the incident at hand is no more than a rowdy act of terrorism. However, the fears of the magical community are rising and the voices demand that the Ministry act up in a time of mounting panic.*

“Rowdy act my a—“ Ron exclaimed but was stopped mid-word as Hermione clapped a hand over his mouth.

“I can’t believe the Ministry’s still denying it!” she exclaimed.

“Its Voldemort,” Harry spat out angrily crumpling up the smudged clipping and stuffing it into his cloak pocket. “There’s no one else soul-less enough to kill an innocent family except him.”

A muffled sound came from Ron who still struggled to release his mouth from Hermione’s hand. She pushed away, obviously annoyed, pressing her fingers to her teeth.

“That’s sick,” Ron growled pushing his half finished plate away from him and pausing to make a face at Hermione. “To think that wizards and witches of Britain rely on that sorry excuse of a Minister to protect them.”

“So you lot heard?” a voice said.

“Pretty bad,” said an identical one as the Weasley twins took seats opposite them. “I heard it all from Lee. He reckons that we’ll be locked in the school for sure...for our own safety of course.” The rumble of serious talk was resonating from every table as Dumbledore, dressed in royal blue robes stood up at the high table bringing everyone’s attention to him by clearing his throat, his gleaming beard aglow against the dark pigment of the fabric.

“A few words, please,” he said soberly. “I suppose that most of you have heard of the unfortunate incident several nights ago. Six more people were murdered; bringing up the death toll to nine lives lost. Due to this sudden rise in threatening dangers, my colleagues and I have agreed to suspend all visitation to Hogsmeade for the remainder of the year.”

Here, Harry expected plenty of groans and boos but the crowd was silent, obviously brimming with fear. Dumbledore continued. “Also, be extra aware of your surroundings and situations, even here at Hogwarts where your safety is assured (a snort from the Slytherin’s table carried through the hall but was ignored). And to our students third year an up; as a consolation for your canceled Hogsmeade trips a surprise is being arranged and is to be announced.” The headmaster paused and stared out into the glum silence, and then a gentle smile happened upon his face. “As for Quidditch—” George groaned loudly into the silent hall “—we all expect a very exciting first game in a few weeks.” George promptly cheered. Dumbledore seemed as if he were holding in a chuckle as he glanced in the direction of the Weasley twins.

“And the last bit of news,” he added, pressing the tips of his long fingers together. “Hogwarts has always been a welcoming home for its students. I hope you can all extend that warmth to a guest of ours who comes to us by unusual circumstances. Her name is Jade, and she’s about fourteen or fifteen. She is the girl who was found unconscious after coming out of the Forbidden Forest a few days ago.”

“I ask that everyone treat her decently and with mutual respect. In time, she will become a full fledged student like yourselves until her family can be located. For now, I would like to request the utmost patience from you all, because of her ‘condition’, as she seems to have a bout of amnesia. I trust you all can judge how to act appropriately.” A soft snort interrupted him from the Slytherin table once more. For a moment, Dumbledore stared through the hall at, Harry thought, Draco Malfoy.

"That is all," Dumbledore said with a gentle smile as he returned his gaze to the crowd. "By all means, enjoy your breakfast." With that, he took his seat and students began to depart for their first class.

## 7. Snape's Return

It was hard to say whether the students were happy with Severus Snape's return or merely relieved that their lessons would finally make sense. As much as Harry hated Snape, he couldn't wholeheartedly wish for Snape to never return. After having the likes of Dumont teach them, it was a relief to have someone instruct them (be it maliciously) with competence.

"Watch your amounts, Potter," Snape barked as he passed him. "You're a natural waster."

Harry gritted his teeth, rethinking his gratefulness for Snape's return. Hermione on the other hand, looked as if she were inches from throwing a party to welcome back the potions master. Snape had been as cold and domineering as Harry could remember and the class pressed on as if had for the past four years. However Snape looked particularly sour as he announced to the Gryffindors that they should hurry to their next class after the bell rung. It reassured them all that he was not to be their Defense teacher.

Upon entering the Defense against the Dark Arts classroom, Harry, Ron, and Hermione took their seats near the front and searched for signs of a teacher. The bell rang and they sat there in silence. Seamus slammed his head onto the desk.

"Not again," he muttered loudly. "I swear I'll jump out of a window if Dumont happens to be standing in for this class too".

"That won't be necessary, Seamus," came a voice from the doorway. Instantly, Harry looked up, recognizing the humble tone. Beside him, Ron and Hermione perked up too, both of them staring at Harry as if afraid to turn around and view the new defense teacher for themselves.

"Please excuse my tardiness," said Remus Lupin as he walked towards the front of the class, "I'm a few weeks late."

The class was silent, staring in open mouth awe at their old, and well-liked professor. Before Lupin could make any further remarks, his students erupted with welcomes and hellos. He grinned at them, the lines of his face becoming more pronounced. Despite his fine lines and white-flecked brown hair, there was liveliness back in Lupin's eyes that revealed his true youth—Harry's father would have been Lupin's age.

It was ultimately, the spiteful announcement by Snape at the end of their third year that resulted in Lupin's hasty resignation, though the talented professor would say otherwise. Harry knew that Lupin carried a guilt that Harry understood too well, and it shocked him to see his favorite professor's return. Most everyone knew that Lupin was a werewolf—though after last year, he had heard many students and staff murmuring their hopes of finding a Defense teacher as capable as Lupin.

Another thought wormed its way through Harry's brain as Lupin lightly stepped to the front of the class. He could vaguely recall Dumbledore sending Sirius to Lupin's place, but now as he sat in his Defense class, he excitedly realized that Lupin most likely knew something about Sirius's whereabouts.

After the greetings died down, Lupin began the class as if he had never left Hogwarts. Everyone paid rapt attention, even Ron who eagerly took notes. Before they knew it, class had ended and they compiled their things to leave. Hermione, Ron, and Harry lagged behind as their peers slowly drifted out the door, sifting through their papers slowly until the last of their fellow students disappeared. Finally, Hermione dropped her bag and approached Lupin happily.

"We're so glad you're back," she said, grinning from ear to ear. Lupin thanked her, though there was a hesitation visible in his eyes.

"I didn't know how much I missed teaching until now," Lupin acknowledged.

"Everyone thought you weren't coming back," Ron noted.

"I wasn't planning on ever coming back," Lupin admitted quietly, "not to teach anyway—not after what could have happened two years ago."

"Really though," said Ron who had been within biting-distance of Lupin as he had transformed into an uncontrollable werewolf two years ago. "That risk is nothing compared to the knowledge we need against the Dark Arts if You-Know-Who really came back..." he trailed off, looking at Harry. His green eyes flickered, but he shrugged his shoulders in attempts at indifference.

"No one could prepare us better," Harry said, brushing off the subject and forcing a smile. Lupin looked at him thoughtfully—almost apologetically.

"I really missed you lot...missed teaching, and Hogwarts too," he said. Harry could not wait any longer to inquire about his godfather. Glancing at the door to make sure no one was within hearing distance, he lowered his voice.

"How's Snuffles?" Harry whispered. To his great surprise, Lupin coughed and burst into laughter.

"He's having you call him *Snuffles*?" Their professor choked.

"Is that bad?" Harry asked, confused.

"No..." Lupin said, unable to wipe the broad smile from his face. "But doesn't 'Snuffles' strike you as.... well, as extremely cute and fluffy?" Ron was now grinning too with a sort of bemused enlightenment on his face.

"Serious serial killer...alias 'Snuffles,'" he quipped.

"Now I know why he wouldn't tell me what he calls himself," Lupin said. "Yes, well, Sirius is doing absolutely fine...you know he has yet to pay rent and between he and Buckbeak raiding my food supplies, I'm going to starve." Harry laughed imagining his Godfather stretched out on a sofa watching a game on television, vegging out.

"That's what I get for not keeping guard at the pantry," Lupin said riffling through a few papers.

"How did you manage it, I mean returning as a staff member without parents breaking down the doors?" Hermione broke in curiously. "Isn't Dumbledore worried about that?" She stopped shortly, and added, "not that I'm not the happiest student that you're back."

Lupin smiled, and looked up at Hermione, a girl he had once called the cleverest witch her age.

"You know, I'd actually be relieved if I was stormed out of here," he said. Harry, Ron, and Hermione didn't question that, as they knew that Lupin wanted desperately to destroy any chance of repeating the near fatal incident of two years yore.

"Apparently," the werewolf finally said thoughtfully, "Dumbledore has managed to convince a large number of parents with test scores and frilly arguments that I was the most dependable Defense instructor—and needless to say, it may very well be the most important lesson from here on in." One look, and Harry could tell that Lupin hardly believed his words.

"What've you been doing since Hogwarts?" Harry asked, sensing that it was time for a new topic.

"Traveling mostly," Lupin replied but didn't elaborate much. "Seeing some notable witches and wizards." He lowered his voice. "By the way, Harry, 'Snuffles'—he let out a snort—"says hello and sorry that he hasn't visited or written. He's in the area and didn't want to risk being spotted. Says he'll answer your question someday."

"So he is rooting around England?" Harry blurted out disapprovingly. I thought you said he's lounging around your place like the idle bum he should be..." Lupin smiled.

"I suppose I exaggerate."

"I'd rather he was," Harry muttered. Ron sensing the sensitivity of topic, took the conversational reigns.

"So what about the Ministry..." he said. "How are they and.... you know, you being a werewolf and teaching."

For a moment Lupin's face grew serious, but he soften it by flashing a tiny smile.

"I've been at the Ministry for the past two weeks," he said. "Dumbledore had presented to them that I was the only trustworthy person that could fill the Dark Arts position. Hiring just anyone would be putting more risk to the students than my condition, also noting that mine can be controlled with Wolfsbane—everything must be systematically charted of course." He paused and a bit of the old weariness crept with startling speed over his face.

"Dumbledore has kept me updated about what happened last year," Lupin said unobtrusively. Harry knew the Lupin's worry was for him, but he also realized that he didn't want it. Harry was tired of people worrying about him—he could do that just fine on his own. Pushing a hand through his untidy hair, Harry seemed to convey the fact that he wanted the subject to vanish.

"On top of that," Remus said somehow catching the drift, "with all the work the Ministry's up to, they simply let me slid through without much thought."

"They've let a lot of things slide through without much thought," Ron muttered bitterly, before adding. "At least they got one thing right." Lupin laughed, and it was good to see that he had not lost his humor.

"Don't get too attached," he said almost sadly. "I'm only staying until a more suitable professor is found...I made Professor Dumbledore promise me that I was his last resort and that he will continue to look for a permanent professor."

"Oh, don't go," Hermione said. "You're the best teacher we've got." Lupin didn't say anything. Instead he turned and began to unpack his battered suitcase as Hermione, Ron, and Harry watched him in silence. Harry wondered if the professor knew just how much his presence was affecting them...Harry himself. This man, after all, was a friend of his father's, practically a brother to his rightful guardian...Lupin's presence was proof that Dumbledore was still very much in control.

"So I hear Hogwarts has a new inhabitant," Lupin finally said, breaking the silence.

"Yes," Hermione answered. "Jade."

"Hasn't remembered anything has she?"

"Not a morsel," Ron answered.

"Last I heard, she seems to not even know English," he replied.

"But she's learning quickly," Harry added. "On top of that, she's slowly remembering the little things—she doesn't try walking into glass anymore."

Lupin nodded thoughtfully and Harry wondered why he seemed was so curious about Jade. If Lupin wanted to know, he could have gone right up to Dumbledore and asked about her.

Harry knew that Lupin's presence back at Hogwarts was only part of Dumbledore's "request". The professor's other duty was most likely involvement in the fight waged against the Dark Lord. So far, the only army set against Voldemort was the one led by Dumbledore...it infuriated Harry every time he remembered that the Minister had failed to follow suit.

"You know," Lupin spoke up. "I just got here before class, and I'm wondering if Professor Snape is back yet."

"He is," Harry answered, raising a brow curiously. Lupin nodded and stood up without bothering to explain.

"I'm sorry about being so quick to leave, but I have to talk to him," he said motioning them towards the door, before adding a grin. "It was very nice seeing you all again."

\* \* \*

“What do you two say about visiting Jade?” Harry asked later that day as he, Ron, and Hermione flipped through their Astronomy charts. “This stuff can wait for a time when we can actually see stars.” They agreed and left the common room, making their way through the halls towards the infirmary. The door was opened just a crack, and from just inside several voices halted them. They could make out the shapes through the frosted pane. Harry put a hand out to stop Hermione from knocking.

“So that’s it? She stays?” replied a voice rather heatedly. It was recognizably Snape’s.

“Where else is she going to go?” Dumbledore’s voice returned.

“We don’t even know for sure who she is yet,” spoke up Lupin’s voice.

“Headmaster, from what I have witnessed,” Snape said with vehemence, “it has become what Voldemort desires, and I don’t know how he knows about it. We’re making the same mistake twice.” Hermione looked as if she was about to say something, but Harry put his finger to his lips.

“Severus,” Dumbledore said firmly. “I thank you for your input. I know you get your facts at severe cost, but you must trust me. *It can’t be taken if it doesn’t truly exist.*” The figure on the left hand side straightened.

“Yes, Headmaster,” Snape responded, struggling to swallow a wash of bitter anger. “I understand your platform.” The knob turned, making Harry, Ron, and Hermione stumble back into each other. The door was flung open and their potions master stood before them, glaring at each of their faces.

“Always meddling with trouble, Potter,” he muttered cryptically to Harry. Without another word, Snape shut the door behind him and brushed quickly past. Ron raised an eyebrow and whirled his index figure at the side of his head. Snape may be cracking, but he would always be keen on finding error in Harry’s existence. They wondered what “trouble” Snape meant.

Hermione made a motion to knock on the door, but before she could, a kind face crowned by flowing white hair and beard peeked out at them.

“Come in,” Dumbledore said and they entered rather cautiously. The light played with a twinkle across the light blue irises of the Headmaster’s eyes as he shut the door behind them. Lupin stood beside him, briefly smiling them a welcome.

“Nice to see you all again,” he said, “and so soon.”

“We just came to visit Jade,” Hermione spoke up.

“I know,” Dumbledore replied, shutting the ward door behind him. “I believe she’d be delighted to see you.”

They nodded and walked towards Jade’s bed, which had been moved down next to the window that overlooked the lake. She seemed to be very attracted to the view. Jade was currently sitting casually in a chair, her feet kicked up onto the bed, reading from *Common Transfigurations*.

“Hi, Jade,” Harry said pleasantly, seating himself across from her. Lupin sat down beside him and picked up one of the books that littered the bedside table.

“What’s up?” Jade returned, not bothering to look up from the book. Dumbledore cleared his throat and she instantly paid them her full attention. Realizing that she had company, she leapt to her feet and pushed all the books off her bed, startling Hermione, before making motions as if insisting they all take a seat. Grinning, Ron sat on one side of the bed. Dumbledore insisted Hermione take the chair next to Jade as he leaned his tall frame against the windowsill. Hermione made to sit down, but quickly shot up from the chair. There was a book lying in her seat and she picked up before reseating herself. Curiously, she flipped through the pages as Jade continued to grin blankly at all of them.

“Do you understand any of this stuff?” Hermione asked glancing up at her. Jade just continued smiling. Dumbledore chuckled and Lupin reached over and flipped open the book, pointing to a transfiguration example. Jade’s smile faded into a tight-lipped expression as she nodded firmly, taking the book from him.

The directions were for transfiguring pewter into a precious metal. Dumbledore handed Jade the battered goblet from her bedside table. She took it and placed it on her bed, then, grasping the green pendant around her neck, she stared at the goblet muttering a Latin phrase under her breath. Within a few seconds, the dull metal began to brighten in hue, and at last, became a golden goblet. She held it up triumphantly. Ron, Hermione, and Harry stared at her, rather dumbfounded.

"How..." Hermione began rather bewildered. "Without a wand?" Lupin took the goblet from Jade who was now smiling broadly again.

"Jade does have a wand," Lupin began, "well, sort of. You see a wand concentrates one's magic. Remember that magic does not originate in a wand but in a person's soul. If wands were truly magic of their own accord, anyone, wizard or muggle could use one; Jade's wand just happens to be that pendant."

"That can't be very common," Harry said as Lupin handed him the goblet.

"Some witches and wizards still use amulets, hats, and rings in certain regions in Europe and Asia," Dumbledore replied. "It is an old form of magic. It may help tell us about her past...for example her parent's may be hierarchy Europeans, who still use amulets, or historians who prefer methods of old."

"So does she remember transfiguration?" Harry asked.

"She just read that book and did it," Ron said, still in a state of shock. "It's almost like she just learned it." Dumbledore looked at the books thoughtfully.

"I can't answer you question," he said rather sadly. "The books she's been reading can either offer an outlet for her abilities, or stimulate old memories of her own studies."

Time passed as they continue to converse, struggling to include Jade in their conversations. At first, the girl paid rapt attention, but it was obvious by the blank smile on her face that she had no idea what they were speaking about. Once in a while she'd jump in and yell out a word she recognize before sinking back into her chair and contenting herself with tying her hair in knots. Eventually, the smile faded and was replaced by a rather bored expression, which urged to them to wrap up.

\* \* \*

After a very interesting lesson on the silk mordants in Magical Creatures with Hagrid, a thrilling departure into the paranormal in Divinations, and a slow, never-ending lecture in History of Magic, the week came to a close. Ron sighed as he dumped his bulging backpack into a chair in front of the common room fireplace. It was lit to ward off the creeping chill that began to weave its way around the castle.

"The lessons seem to be dragging on endlessly," Ron whined plopping down into an armchair.

"That's because you're not taking advantage of the lessons," Hermione stated matter-of-factly choosing a seat across from him.

"It's because I don't have any Chocoballs or Pepper Imps to stave my hopelessness," he muttered bitterly.

"Here, here," Harry added solemnly, choosing an armchair between his friends. "Potions seemed a lot more bearable knowing there was Honeydukes or the Three Broomsticks to look forward to."

"The only thing that would make Potions bearable for you two," Hermione replied, "is if Snape decided on making a career change—"

"Fantastic luck," Harry interrupted, grinning at the thought. "Snape as a florist...what do you think Ron?"

"In which case," Hermione broke in, giving each a look to further punctuate her point. "Dumont would be more than happy to take the duties of potions master fully."

"You really know how to slaughter a good fantasy," Ron lamented. Harry sniggered but stopped abruptly when Hermione raised her eyebrows at him.

“Speaking of Snape,” Harry said forcing down a final chortle. “Didn’t you think that argument between he, Dumbledore, and Lupin was a bit—odd?” Ron and Hermione were thoughtfully silent.

“Last year,” Ron began. “Sorry Harry, I hate to bring that up...but last year, remember how Dumbledore told Snape that he had a job to do...I reckon that’s what Snape’s meaning when he talked about what he’s seen...probably spying on the Death Eaters”

“Whatever he’s doing,” Harry murmured thoughtfully, “it’s got to be dangerous considering he knows what Voldemort is after.” Hermione agreed.

“You don’t think Dumbledore’s hiding whatever he’s after *here*, do you?” she mused softly. “I mean not after the what could have happened with the sorcerer’s stone?

“Probably not,” Harry replied. “But he also said something about it not existing...maybe its broken or something.”

“You don’t s’pose whatever it is or was is linked to Jade, do you?” Ron asked furrowing his brow.

“It seems a bit far fetched,” Hermione answered. “I figure that on top of whatever You-Know...(Harry caught her eye and she cleared her throat) er...Voldemort is after, Jade is just another burden Snape doesn’t want Dumbledore to be dealing with.”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Harry said. “The question is why would Snape be so set against Jade staying? Besides the fact that he’s just really anti-social.”

“Probably for the same reasons as the Ministry,” Hermione supplied. Ron’s lips grew into a rather thin line.

“The Ministry has a real knack for choosing jobs to do,” he hissed. “If they’d get their head on straight, maybe Sirius and Dumbledore wouldn’t have to worry about dangers in Hogsmeade. Then I could get myself some chocolate.”

“Well no good in sitting here moping,” Hermione insisted in attempts to lift the rather sullen mood. “Come on, let’s go visit Jade.”

“Can’t,” Harry answered, standing up. “I’ve got practice, you two go ahead.”

\* \* \*

Ron and Hermione walked him part of the way before taking a turn towards the infirmary, leaving him to exit the castle alone. He was the first person on the pitch, which was empty save Madam Hooch who was levitating the crate of game balls from their storage in the locker room. He waved to her and she greeted him. The air was crisp and smelled faintly of moist earth. Harry closed his eyes for a moment before deciding to seize the moment and a take a fly around the empty stadium. The chilly air numbed his cheeks as he tore even higher through the stadium, feeling his hair whip about his face. As he took another round, he spotted two people walking onto to the pitch.

“You ruddy show-off,” Fred called good-naturedly from the ground, arm around Angelina.

“Jealous?” Harry called back, grinning. He took a final turn and landed.

“Not even,” Fred returned with feigned resentment. He then put his hands on his hips and wagged a finger up at Harry. “Besides, after nearly toasting yourself silly in a lightning storm, you should only be allowed to fly with supervision.”

“You’re one to talk ‘Gred’ Weasley,” Angelina inserted raising an eyebrow at him. “You should only be allowed *in* England with supervision.”

“Angelina!” Fred exclaimed with a hand over his heart. “You wound me!”

“Careful there,” George said as he joined them, broom over his shoulders. “I don’t doubt she’d take that as an invitation to.”

Soon Seamus, Angela, and Katie joined them and the practice began, with Angelina shouting pieces of new plays at them. Madam Hooch released the snitch, its tiny wings fluttering in the dying light, and Harry hovered in the air giving it a head start. As he circled about the stadium, he noticed three figures make their way into the stadium and watched as they seated themselves next to Madam Hooch. Harry recognized them as Ron, Hermione, and Jade. Jade awkwardly jerked about, looking thoroughly amazed by all the flying.

Harry swooped down near them and hollered a hello. They grinned and waved, Jade staring in awe at the swooping bludgers.

When darkness had finally succeeded in covering the pitch, Angelina called them in. Before releasing them, she gave them a stern lecture on studying the plays and being serious at practice if they wanted to pound Slytherins in their first match in two weeks. Harry and Seamus walked toward Hermione, Ron, and Jade, who was leaning haphazardly against the barrier to better watch Fred and George wrestle the bludgers back into their crate. Seamus cleared his throat as he approached Hogwart's uninvited guest.

Hello," he said to Jade. "So...you like quidditch?" She turned to face him, eyes wide with excitement. "KEWH-DITCH!!!" she yelled inches from his face grinning like an idiot.

"I guess that means 'yeah,'" Seamus said wincing, before leaning towards Harry and whispering, "No memory right?" Harry was mildly annoyed, but forced himself to nod anyway. He felt there were already enough rumors going around about Jade; nearly everyone already thought she was stupid, it wasn't fair for her to be considered a mental case too. He ignored it, reminding himself that Seamus so far, had only heard rumors about her.

"She's got amnesia," Harry replied evenly. Seamus nodded, turning his attention to Ron and Hermione to say a hello before smiling at Jade again.

"Dumbledore's told us about you," he said to her. "So you'll be part of the Hogwarts family. Welcome, I'm Seamus Finnigan, its Jade, right?" He stuck out a broad hand waiting for the raven-haired girl to shake it. She didn't make to shake—instead she just raised her eyebrow at his palm. Seamus looked a bit faze but could only watch as Jade reached out, turned his open palm up before slapping it with her own hand.

"What's up?" she said grinning. Seamus laughed amused at the informalities.

"Nothing much," he said gently, grinning an amiable smile. "Nice to meet you."

\* \* \*

On Saturday, they were forced inside by yet another wet storm. Hermione, Ron, and Harry had spent the morning doing homework in the common room as Jade doodled away on several sheets of parchment. After that, when it seemed the sky obliged to some dryness, they tried to convince Madam Pomfrey to allow Jade to accompany them to Hagrid's cabin, but the nurse refused, insisting she wanted to measure the girl's state of mind for the millionth time.

So they departed, after promising to return later, for a little afternoon tea with Hagrid. After a couple hours mulling over Jade's improvement, quidditch, and the follies of the Ministry, they left the comfort of the half-giant's warm abode. They dashed towards the castle to beat the onslaught of rain that stabbed through their cloaks and plunged into the massive entrance of the castle.

Wringing out the hems of their cloaks, they made their way up towards the infirmary to give Jade a gift from Hagrid; a rock hard bunt cake. Hermione led them into the hospital wing to discover it empty.

"Hello?" Hermione called, walking between the beds. "Madam Pomfrey? Jade?" She was answered by silence. Ron placed the wrapped cake down on a nightstand and took note of Jade's neatly made bed and haphazard stack of books on a nearby table.

"Where'd they go?" he asked. Just then Madam Pomfrey burst into the room completely out of breath.

“Where’s...the girl?!” she gasped, leaning her hands on her knees.

“You don’t know where she is?” Harry asked startled, walking towards Pomfrey and helping her to sit down.

“She disappeared an hour ago,” she replied a bit frantic. “She just left, she doesn’t know her way around! Maybe she went out onto the grounds...without a cloak! I thought maybe she went with you!” Harry shook his head, swallowing in attempts to quench his dry throat.

“She’s probably just exploring the castle, Madam Pomfrey,” he replied reassuringly hoping that Jade had not gotten herself into any trouble. “We’ll go find her.”

Hermione and Ron followed Harry out and quickly, they searched sections of the castle Jade had shown extreme interest in. The library, the trophy room, several unused classrooms, several art adorn hallways. As they spiraled up another turret, Ron shook his head.

“She could be lost for days in this castle!” he exclaimed. Hermione and Harry stopped beside him when then reached the top stair.

“We need to find her,” Harry said, “I don’t like the idea of her alone...” for some reason he was having trouble forming what he felt into words. It was the feeling he had about her every since she stumbled from the forest: there was something very wrong about her, yet he felt as if he were connected to her—as if he couldn’t lead her into danger. It really was quite an irrelevant fear.

Hermione agreed, worried that Jade could have easily gotten herself into a rut with the likes of Malfoy or someone of similar cruelty lurking about, as well as her desire to “taste” things (if they hadn’t stopped her, she would have tried sipping from ink bottles). They turned into a hallway that Harry recognized led to Dumbledore’s office. As they passed the massive gargoyle that guarded the Headmaster’s office, it startled the trio by standing up and moving so that two figures could emerge from the staircase behind it. Jade and Dumbledore appeared, the Headmaster wearing only one of his shoes and Jade looking quite safe.

“Oh, hello” Dumbledore said pleasantly one hand behind his back. Ron’s mouth slackened as Harry and Hermione raised their eyebrows. They stared at the star patterned sock on the wizened man’s foot. Guessing their reason for surprise, Dumbledore winked over his half-moon spectacles.

“Jade and I have been flipping through some spells and such,” he explained, nodding at the book in her hands. “She catches on very quickly to lessons in Latin. She’s very keen on charms because of it.” Smiling jovially, he pulled his hand from behind his back to reveal his missing shoe, which was tap dancing on his palm.

“Its awfully hard to put on such a spirited shoe,” he said, shaking his head at the buckled-boot. “Jade did a fair job on it though with a festivities charm.” Ron and Harry stifled laughs as Dumbledore dropped the shoe and attempted to seize it with his foot. Hermione’s cheeks turned a purple shade as she struggled to remain respectful. She didn’t see the Headmaster wink at Jade.

“We’ve been looking for Jade, Professor,” Hermione squeaked. “Madam Pomfrey was really worried.”

“She nearly had kittens,” Ron broke in, earning an elbow to the ribs from Hermione.

“Her? Lost? On the contrary,” Dumbledore said with a chortle, “Jade seems to know the castle better than myself.” Jade grinned a Cheshire cat smile, most satisfied with the compliment.

“Madam Pomfrey practically had to send herself to the hospital wing when she thought you lost yourself,” Harry said to Jade grinning. Just then a sweeping figure graced the hallway. It was Snape with a set look on his face, a book called *Ancient Charms of Power* in his arms.

“Headmaster,” he said urgently, casting a familiar disgusted look at Harry, Hermione, and Ron. “I need to talk to you...regarding some matters.” His hair was more unkempt than usual and his face had taken a strange green color.

“Are you all right, Professor?” Hermione asked tensely, noting the unusual pallor.

“Stop prying, Granger,” he snapped in a low undertone, making Hermione take a step backwards.

“Will you please accompany Jade back to Madam Pomfrey?” Dumbledore asked, looking at her apologetically. “I would come to conclude that she’s not too happy about losing a patient.” Jade faced the two men before turning to leave, and Harry could have sworn that fear was etched in Snape’s black eyes as Jade swept her dark irises over him. Harry hesitated then followed her, Hermione, and Ron back down the hall.

## 8. The Girl Speaks

Several weeks past since Jade's solitary exploration of the castle and she began to take in daily excursions while Harry, Hermione, and Ron were in class now that she had a full grasp on the operation of doors, glass, and slippery corridors.

Students began to accept her presence as the norm and she warmly greeted them with a growing vocabulary of welcomes, though she had yet to truly communicate. She was apt to peek curiously through doorways during lessons, and spent a large amount of time with Lupin or Hagrid, both of whom she had grown rather fond of. If she wasn't spending time helping Hagrid cut dragon liver, Lupin clean the feature creature tanks, or tagging along with Ron, Harry, and Hermione, she practiced the fine stylings of Fred and George Weasley. They had given her, as a welcoming gift, a half dozen Canary Creams and a box of their newly concocted Big Bottom Bons Bons. The latter of the two thrilled Jade the most and under the guidance of the Weasley twins, they were tested on Ron.

"Crème Bon Bons!" Ron exclaimed as he accepted one from the box she held out to him. Her face was unreadable as she gestured for him to take more. Hermione joined them as Jade offered the box to Harry. Before Harry could sink his teeth into the delicacy, Ron fell backwards onto the floor in a puff of smoke.

"Fred! George!" Ron hollered furiously. A crowd was beginning to gather as the smoke dissipated to reveal Ron, sitting hunched over on the floor atop his oversized bum. It looked as if he had stuffed several of Trelawney's poufs into the seat of his trousers.

Harry choked and dropped his bon bon. A snigger erupted from his throat before he could stop himself, and he and all the other bystanders burst into laughter. Fred and George appeared on the scene, observing their little brother's situation thoughtfully. George cleared his throat and pointed at Ron discretely.

"Making an ass of himself again," he said matter-of-factly to Hermione.

"I'm going to kill both of you," Ron said darkly as his brothers magicked measuring tape from thin air and proceeded to take measurements. "Very, very violently."

"You should re-think those slacks," Harry managed between fits of laughter. "They make you look a bit bottom heavy."

"Are you saying I look fat?" Ron snapped giving his rear-end a poke for good measure. Jade was scarlet with giggles as Ron struggled to slap away his brothers. He tried to swing himself up, but the weight of his rear pulled him straight down again. Unsuccessful, he rolled his eyes and said, "Alright, what's it called?"

"Big Bottom Bon Bons," Fred said as Colin Creevey hurried to get his camera. "I'd say the test went well, all thanks to our new team member, Jade...you can have Ron's job."

"What?!" Ron exclaimed. "That's the only way I can get my hands on a sickle!"

"I s'pose we could use you for a nice cushion or something..." George added.

"How long is that supposed to last?" Harry asked, clutching both his sides as he fought back another chortle.

"We've made some calculations—" Fred murmured.

"—all theoretical, you see," George completed.

"In short, when?"

The twins looked at each other and shrugged.

"Dunno."

“What?!” Ron cried out, panicked. He looked up from face to face, finally finding Hermione’s. “You can fix this, can’t you?” he asked her, a note of pleading in his voice. Her eyebrows furrowed as she surveyed his dilemma.

“I don’t know,” Hermione said finally as a rather evil grin spread across her face. “It’s a rather *big* problem.” But before Ron’s dignity was further punctured, a hiss, much like that of escaping air from a balloon was heard as Ron’s bum deflated to normal size. At this point, Harry, Fred, George, and Jade (and several feet away, Dean) were practically rolling on the ground with laughter. Ron stood up and examined himself.

“I reckon my trousers are all stretched out...damn it, I just got these,” he murmured as Jade offered him the box of bon bons again. “Oh no, you keep those away...”

\* \* \*

The end of October brought a full moon, and as Halloween neared, Lupin took ill and none other than the abstract Professor Dumont substituted for his class.

“You can ward off a vampire with holy water, a cross, or garlic,” Dumont said tapping her wand against her oblong glasses. “Yes, that would usually hold the buggers off. Although, I don’t remember if you must throw the holy water on them.... or if you just wave it around madly in front of their eyes...” Ron groaned and scratched out a huge section of his notes hopelessly. Hermione’s hand darted into the air.

“Yes—,” Dumont looked down at her seating chart, “—Ms Granger?”

“You must sprinkle the water on a vampire, brandish a cross in front of its eyes, and they must smell the garlic to be warded off,” Hermione said with the dexterity of a textbook. Dumont was silent, still examining the seating chart.

“Was I wrong, Professor?” Hermione asked, her back hunching over the table as she nervously flipped open her *Defense Against the Dark Arts Book 5*. “I could have sworn it was sprinkle the water...or perhaps, it was ‘pour’.”

“Hmm? I’m sorry, what were you saying?” Dumont questioned, looking up at Hermione. She blinked from behind her oblong frames blankly.

“You can ward off a vampire—” Hermione started to repeat before Dumont interrupted her with a hasty wave of her hand.

“Oh yes, correct,” she replied. “I just happen to notice your name...Hermione ... daughter of the goddess Helen... a child whose beauty was the gods’ pride and joy.

“Hermione?” Harry said out loud on accident. He turned to look at her to find that she was struggling to hide her scarlet face with her bushy hair. Immediately, he mentally kicked himself and picked up his quill.

“Fitting name,” Dean said. Hermione pretended she was too immersed in scribbling out notes to hear him, but the increased intensity of the red color of her face said otherwise.

“Says you,” Ron muttered a little louder than he meant, shooting a glare at Dean before returning to his notes. Hermione looked past Harry at Ron with what was undoubtedly a rather hurt expression. Harry caught her eye apologetically, and she flashed him a quick smile before returning to her notes as if she didn’t really care. Dumont was lecturing again, though now she intermingled magical History, Greek mythology, and Vampires together into what turned out to be information both extremely hard to follow and useless.

At one point Dean even leaned forward towards Hermione and whispered pleadingly, “D’you think you could help me review this tonight—if I don’t pass my O.W.Ls, my mum will personally stamp out my existence.” Hermione looked up quickly and forced a weak smile.

“Sure,” she replied ignoring the wide-eyed look from Ron, “after dinner, all right?” Dean nodded happily.

The bell rang and they departed Defense against the Dark Arts for Potions. Harry noticed that Hermione took extra precaution to keep him between her self and Ron. Dean took the opportunity to immerse her in discussions of vampire hexing, while Ron walked silently beside Harry, unusually engrossed in the Transfiguration packet (held upside down, of course). He only relented when Dean joined Seamus farther up the hall.

As they reached the first floor, they caught sight of Jade, who was tilting the frame of a painting hung near the stairwell that led to the dungeons, examining it every which way.

“Hi, Jade,” Hermione said. Several other students including Harry and Ron greeted her.

“What’s kicking?” Jade replied exuberantly, dropping the frame so that it bounced back onto the wall, earning her a reprimanding scowl from its subject. She had a book clutched in her hands as usual.

“What are you reading?” Harry asked curiously and she turned the book over so that he could view the front cover. On the worn red leather, the faded title read *Extensive Potions*. Ron laughed and took the book, flipping through its stained pages.

“That’ll make you popular with the boys, that will,” he announced with a grin. Hermione growled and her fist rolled into balls at her sides.

“That’s all that’s important to you, isn’t it?” she shot with an icy edge that seemed to shock even Jade. Ron’s eyebrows raised incredulously at her, looking as if he were suddenly rendered befuddled by her words. Harry cleared his throat, and pretended the rather obviously heated exchange of words didn’t happen at all.

“We better go,” he hastily broke in, quickly nodding at Jade. “The bell’s about to ring.” Hermione huffed her agreement, and brushed past Ron without a second glance, making an extra effort to nearly knock him over with her rucksack.

“See you after class,” Harry said, turning apologetically to Jade who was staring after Hermione curiously. Ron managed a quick wave before following Harry down the stairwell.

“What crawled up her nose and died?” Ron muttered to Harry regarding Hermione’s cold shoulder as they descended the steps. Ron obviously had no idea his resentment of Dean had resulted in an insult to their friend.

“Just be nice,” Harry returned leading him to a seat near Hermione. They sat, Harry between the two miffed parties, and class began—the lesson of the day, a delightful review.

“Does no one know how to conclude a Memory Draught?” Snape said irritably after nearly an hour passed. Since his absence nearly a month ago, he had been more edgy than usual. The word, “torture” gave no justice to how badly Snape treated the Gryffindors, but then again, he was pretty sour with the Slytherins too. In fact...he was sour with anything that moved...or breathed...or was known to be composed of atoms.

“The O.W.Ls are in a matter of months,” he hissed quietly, squishing a dried beetle the first finger and thumb of his hand. “Has no one been reading through the packet? There is a whole *section* dedicated to Memory removal and revival, in *bold*. No one”—he deliberately walked past Hermione who was waving her hand wildly in the air—“knows? Do you think you have the slightest chance of pass—” Snape fell silent, staring at a figure who now appeared at the door. “We have a visitor,” he said softly.

Jade stepped into the lit dungeon classroom, looking a bit unsure, clutching the stone around her neck. She quickly flashed a grin apprehensively.

“I would almost bet,” Snape said slowly, “that the amnesiac girl knows more than the empty minds here...and she didn’t even know how to dress herself until recent.”

“Don’t mock her like that,” Harry blurted out angrily, unable to watch Snape ridicule someone who didn’t know it.

“Quiet Potter,” Snape replied evenly.

"You can't scorn her because of—" Harry said but was interrupted by the potions master. Jade's eyes followed the conversation and her knuckles whitened as her grasp on the green pendant tightened. The smile flickered and her eyes narrowed.

"Another word and that's thirty points from Gryffindor," Snape was responding quietly, still eyeing the girl. Harry swallowed the urge to yell "Screw Gryffindor!" refraining because he knew that an outburst like that would be slightly more than social suicide.

"Come on, then," Snape crooned to Jade with a sinister undertone. "Maybe the class can help you glimpse who you really are. Perhaps you could try out this memory potion, *if* someone were to know how to complete it."

Jade stared at him, her features now hard and unreadable. She looked from face to face before slowly making her way up to the front of the class, her robes brushing against tables as she passed. Snape peered down his hooked nose at her and his eyes flickered with noticeable agitation at being so near her.

The class watched in silence, even Malfoy failed to react smartly to Jade's presence. She released her pendant, her eyes brightening, her mouth opening as if to say something. They all waited with bated breath.

"Quill!" Jade's attention was now drawn to a shiny object. Suddenly unaware of Snape, she picked up the beautiful peacock quill, chuckling with amusement.

"Brilliant," Snape muttered flatly. A snigger suddenly erupted from the Slytherins and malicious fingers pointed at the girl who stood before the Potions Master, ignorant of her ignorance.

From his seat, Harry felt his face grow hot and beside him, Hermione's hand dropped to her side, while Ron's eyes narrowed dangerously. They had to do something, Harry thought, they couldn't let her just stand there completely oblivious, they had to—

"Memory Draught," Jade said simply. It was enough to startle the room into silence. The smirk that was beginning to tug at the corners of Snape's mouth fell instantly. He looked taken aback.

"What did you say?" he asked slowly, straightening his long frame.

"Memory Draught," Jade repeated, finally putting the quill down. "Is composed of several key factors including blair mushrooms, unicorn tail hairs, beetle's eyes, and crushed palm weeds. To complete it, the potion must set for five hours under a full moon, then sprinkled with coarse sea salt." Her voice was low and she spoke striking every syllable as if she were carefully hammering down the language. Snape eyed her in unpleasant shock.

"She talks," Malfoy murmured. Harry, Ron, and Hermione cast glances at each other, all three baffled at Jade's sudden verbal ability. Up front, Jade attempted a smile, which came out an amused smirk.

"Am I correct, Professor Snape?" she said more as a statement than a question. Snape was speechless as he leaned forward so that his face was inches from her's. The class watched in anticipation.

"Do you..." he began, squinting his eyes, ignoring the students that still stared unbelievably at the two. "Do you remember who you are?"

"Not at all," Jade answered, allowing one more glance at the shiny quill. "Was I correct?" Snape's nostrils flared and he looked as if he desperately wished she were wrong.

"Yes."

"I really enjoyed the question, I'll be back, all right?" Jade said brightly. "I have read and memorized several books on potions, I would like it if I could try making them." Snape eyed her with mouth slightly ajar at such straightforward chatter.

The bell rung but the class failed to depart. They awaited their Professor's answer, as he fidgeted, looking distraught and hesitant.

"All right," Snape said finally, the poison not at all absent from his tone. "Better you here in my sight than off unsupervised."

"What does he mean by that?" Harry whispered to Ron and Hermione.

"I don't know," Hermione returned.

It was Malfoy who was the first to get up from his seat.

"Well, wasn't that exciting?" he called into the classroom as Crabbe and Goyle followed his example. "The girl all of the sudden thinks she belongs."

The Slytherins slowly began to depart, some laughing indignantly. Snape was still staring at the girl and Jade had yet to move from her position in front of him.

"Thank you Professor," she said, her eyes suddenly locked onto the hooded ones of Snape, who lurched backwards impulsively. Harry thought quickly and stood up, running forward and grabbing Jade by the arm, leading her out with Ron and Hermione behind him.

Lunch was being served in the Great Hall, but they made in the opposite direction (without Ron even objecting to missing a meal), Harry leading the way to Gryffindor tower.

After that display in Potions, they were all curious as to what was running through Jade's mind. They entered the empty common room and chose seats that circled around the lit fireplace. Crookshanks, Hermione's faithful ginger cat greeted her happily by leaping into her lap. She absentmindedly stroked his coarse fur as she stared from one face to another.

"You talked," Harry said in a rather curious tone. Jade's dark pupils flew to his face and she swallowed hard, furrowing her brows, her mouth slightly open.

"Yes. I did," she said simply. "I don't think Snape likes me."

"But you talked," Ron repeated.

"Yes...I know..." Jade said slowly, raising an eyebrow.

"But why now?" Hermione asked in amazement. "When did you remember?" Jade blinked slowly at her, pressing his lips into a thin line.

"I don't know," she answered suddenly, looking away and growing steadily bewildered. "I don't know—I'm speaking—I am speaking. It's so—*strange*." Crookshanks mewed loudly startling the girl. "Its almost like my mouth has never formed these sounds," she muttered edging away from the cat.

"If you remember how to speak, maybe you remember something else," Harry said hopefully. "Do you?"

"Sure" Jade replied, pressing a hand to her pendent in thought. "I remember—your name, and Ron and Hermione's. Oh, and the books I've been reading—those were helpful."

"No, that's not what I meant," Harry tried again. "I mean from your past." Jade shrugged, looking as confused as Harry felt.

"Not even that pendent?" Ron inquired. "It's a peculiar way to do magic." Jade lifted the rectangular piece toward her eyes and looked thoughtfully at it.

"I only know it's a part of me somehow," she said enigmatically, frowning, "it's what makes me Jade...if that makes any sense—but it doesn't make any sense." The edge was coming back to her voice. "I don't understand being here, how I'm even 'speaking'."

She dropped the pendent, her brows knitting so that they nearly became one. Hermione glanced at Ron and Harry and hesitantly, she reached over and put a reassuring arm around Jade's shoulders.

"It's alright," she soothed, "I know you'll remember soon, until then, we'll help you." Harry and Ron readily agreed. Jade looked up at them puzzled, as if wondering how that was at all possible. All was silent until a slight granular "whoosh!" signaled an arrival through the portrait hole.

"Ah," Dumbledore said, eyes twinkling as he entered the common room. Harry, Ron, and Herminone stared at their Headmaster, shell-shocked; they had never seen him there before.

"I figured I might find you all here," Dumbledore was saying as he stepped towards them, "Professor Snape has just informed me on your progress, Jade." He asked for permission to sit with them, which they quickly said yes to. He moved a chair between Hermione and Jade with his wand then sat down, straightening his dark blue robes.

"You're taking the first steps to regaining your memory," Dumbledore said to Jade paternally. Jade forced a smile, which seemed to flop slightly. He looked from each face around him and beaming down his crooked nose.

"Yes, I believe friends as good as Ron, Hermione, and Harry will no doubt help you." This startled Jade, and she stiffened at the unfamiliarity of the words.

"Friends?" she said looking from Dumbledore, then to Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "Companionship." Suddenly her stolid face melted into amazement. For a moment, silence returned as the students marveled at the Headmaster's presence in their common room, and the Headmaster marveled at their very wise innocence.

"Would you like to begin maybe joining classes with your friends?" Dumbledore finally asked Jade.

"I have friends?" Jade said blankly before carefully mulling over the words. "I have friends," she said again, suddenly becoming aware of the meaning. "I'd like very much to attend class with them."

"Excellent!" Dumbledore said pleasantly. "I'll send out a notice to the staff straight away—next week then?" Jade agreed readily and finally her smile became genuine. Their conversation was interrupted by a sound outside the common room entrance.

For the second time, the portrait swung open and a slightly frantic McGonagall tumbled in, brandishing an official looking letter in her left hand.

"Albus," she said barely taking any liberties to greet him, "a letter of importance has arrived from the Minister, regarding the results of Price's committee..." she didn't finish, but Dumbledore seemed to understand.

"Please excuse me," he said flashing a quick smile and proceeded to the exit, "why don't you all take Jade to dinner tonight? I think it's about time she begins joining us in the Hall." He followed McGonagall leaving the four stark confused.

"Price's committee...from the Minister?" Harry murmured. "Is Dumbledore in some sort of trouble?"

"Price..." Ron muttered suddenly, rubbing his chin. "That name sounds familiar."

"That's the man that came to see me the day I woke up here," Jade said pressing her fingertips to her lips. "He had the grayest eyes. I've decided I don't like him. He didn't want me to stay, I think."

"Are you sure?" Hermione asked her. "What could he have against you staying here?"

"Suspicion, I s'pose," Harry said simply. "I doubt the Ministry is willing to do anything that can even be perceived as risky, especially at a school where the Triwizard Tournament was held last year..." he trailed off uncomfortably.

Ron and Hermione exchanged glances and stared at the Boy-Who-Lived. Harry felt his face grow hot. He hated when they looked at him that way.

"I'm really hungry," Harry announced, getting to his feet, "come on, let's see what we can make of lunch." Ron looked like he wanted to say something, but Hermione shook her head at him. Instead they stood and made for the portrait hole.

By dinner that evening, the story of Jade's retort to Professor Snape had circulated thoroughly around the school. When Harry, Ron, and Hermione led Jade into the Great Hall, they were greeted by a strange silence. Many stared at Jade curiously from behind napkins and dinner rolls. After walking in and making their way to the Gryffindor table, the usual racket eventually returned. They sat down next to Dean, Seamus, Neville, and Ginny. As Jade sat down on the bench, they glanced uncomfortably at her. Ginny cleared her throat and offered her the pitcher of pumpkin juice.

"Thanks, man," she said taking it. Ginny raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything.

"Hi, Jade isn't it?" Dean said as he took a seat next to her.

"That is correct, what's up?" she said.

"I'm Dean....Dean Thomas," he said sticking out his hand. She looked at him and a smile slipped onto her face as she slapped his palm.

"Nice to meet you Dean Thomas." Startled, Dean pulled his hand away. Jade looked at him rather apologetically. "I'm sorry," she muttered. "Did I do something wrong? I knew I should have asked Fred more about high-fives—"

"No, no," Dean said quickly. "That was cool—er..." he shrugged and slapped her palm in return. "Nice to meet you."

"And this is my sister," Ron said a little louder than what was perhaps necessary, pulling Jade's attention away from Dean. "Ginny, Jade."

"Nice to meet you," Ginny said, a bit of pink tingeing her ears.

"Same here," Jade said slapping her outstretched hand as well.

Food began to appear on the once empty gold platters, tureens, and servers and Jade watched excitedly as everyone began to dive in. Knitting her brows in concentration she speared a sausage with her fork and after giving it a careful examination, crammed the entire thing in her mouth.

"Knife?" Neville asked shyly, handing her one as she speared another.

"That's Neville," Harry said. Jade grinned a welcome through the contents of her mouth, before eyeing the knife and examining the way Hermione was cutting up her own Salisbury steak. Jade soon gave up on the tool, which she couldn't seem to master, and began piling incomprehensible amounts of food onto her plate instead.

"I don't think even Ron could eat that much, Jade," Harry stated watching as she rolled some buttered Brussels sprouts on top of the growing mound. She had a look of concentration on her face as she chose a Shepard's pie.

"But I still have to try that and that and that," she insisted. "All I ever remember tasting is the soup and bread I got from Madam Pomfrey."

"You don't even remember food?" Ron asked horrified, dropping his fork with a clatter. Jade shook her head and Ron began to dole out several different puddings for her.

By the end of dinner, Jade had sampled nearly everything, including dessert. Dean had commented heartily on her appetite, which Ron insisted added character.

Cho stopped them on the stairs to chat for a few minutes before departing for her own common room. Harry walked with Hermione, Ron, and Jade up to Gryffindor Tower to retrieve his broom for practice, leaving them to whatever they were up to.

Dean had entered shortly after them with Seamus and waved to Hermione. Harry couldn't help laughing as Ron situated himself in citadel fashion between Hermione and Dean as she began to help him with the Defense vampire lesson as promised. Jade had picked up a schoolbook from Hermione's pile and sat in a chair near them, contenting herself with problems and equations.

"Let's head off," Seamus said following Harry out of the common room. "Wouldn't want to keep our captain waiting."

Harry returned an hour and a half later, drenched in sweat and desperately desiring a shower. Angelina, as promised, worked them extremely hard insisting that practice would not end until several more plays were mastered. Seamus walked a bit awkwardly, legs apart, a little sore from straddling a broom in the chilly weather outside.

“Wiggly Waddlesworth,” Harry said to the fat lady.

“Right you are!” she exclaimed as she swung her portrait out. As soon as she did, Jade collided into him and they were both thrown backwards.

“I’m sorry,” she said standing up and giving him a hand. Harry noticed that she looked panicked. “Ron and Hermione were...” Jade babbled, “not speaking on very friendly terms and I thought perhaps...maybe I should leave them alone. Perhaps they’ll just knock each other out.” Harry shook his head, wondering what possibly sparked their bickering.

He entered the thinning crowd of the common room. Near a dark window, left of the fireplace, stood Ron and Hermione, looking as if they were hissing nastily at each other. Dean was nowhere to be seen and Harry speculated that he had finished the vampire assignment.

“Come on,” Harry said, sighing to Jade. “Time to break it up before war is declared.”

“Good luck,” Seamus replied glancing around for Dean as he made for the boy’s bathroom.

“Really, Hermione,” Ron was hissing as Harry and Jade approached, “the boy is just using you for your brain!” Hermione threw up her hands.

“Oh, I see,” she exclaimed, “and you’ve never sunk so low! You’re being absurd, Ron. I was helping him study!”

“No you weren’t! You were giving him answers!”

“I was not! And by the way assignment twenty-three only took us so long because you refused to budge up!”

“Hi,” Harry said reminding himself of his neutrality. “Looks like another apocalyptic event underway.” Hermione threw herself defiantly into a chair.

“Very funny, Harry,” she said sarcastically. “Why don’t you tell Ron here that he’s gone completely potty! He’s just jealous because Dean actually understood the Defense assignment.”

“Me? Jealous?” Ron bellowed furiously. “OF DEAN?!?” His mouth open and shut several times, before he composed himself enough to add, “the nerve. I’m just trying to prevent her from being used by Dean, and *she* thinks I’m a complete nutter!”

“Not this again,” Hermione muttered crossly. Harry knew exactly what she was referring too. It seemed she and Ron had had a very similar argument about one very famous Bulgarian Quidditch player.

“Maybe if you both kill Dean there won’t be anything to argue about,” Jade said, clearing her throat.

“Stop making cracks,” Ron said crossly, walking over to the fireplace and leaning against the mantle.

“I was not!” Jade said. “I haven’t cracked one thing this week!”

“He means don’t joke,” Harry explained before turning his attention back to Ron and Hermione.

“Come on, can’t you two fix this like reasonable people? Be a friend.”

“Well, being a friend is just what I’m trying to do,” Ron announced avoiding his friend’s stare. “Just trying to tell her that Dean’s all moony-eyed for answers.”

“Really?” Hermione spat. “Being a friend? So by hogging my homework for yourself and not letting me help Dean, you’re being a friend?”

“Exactly!” Ron exclaimed, before realizing how unethical that sounded. “NO! Argh... you know what I mean! You’re just doling out answer for free, just because he flutters his eyelashes at you and says things like ‘Oh, Hermione! What a fitting name!',” Ron replied mulishly.

"Just because he gave me a compliment," Hermione returned with equal defiance, "doesn't mean I'd dump my dignity and give him my paper!"

Ron was silent and moved away from the mantel. He flopped into a chair several feet away from her and picked up Harry's copy of *Flying with the Cannons*, burying his face in it.

"Come off it," Harry said pulling off his cloak and muddied robes, dropping them onto the ground. "Both of you. If you two don't stop harassing each other, you can't help me with my assignment twenty-three." He watched them expectantly, waiting for a retort. All he got was disgruntled silence.

"This isn't much better, Harry," Jade noted nervously.

"Come on," Harry insisted more forcefully, grabbing his homework before sitting down at one of the oak tables. Eventually, Hermione, Ron, and Jade joined him. Ron and Hermione remained cool the rest of the evening, but began to talk again before they decided it was time for bed. Rather exhausted, Harry still insisted on accompanying them in escorting Jade back to the infirmary.

"Thanks," Jade said as she entered the dimly lit hospital wing, "I have a feeling I'll be learning a lot from you three." She looked from Hermione and Ron, who both still seemed a bit on edge about each other. "I can see that you all look after each other." Ron ran a hand through his red hair, his ears instantly turning pink.

"No," he muttered, examining his shoe. "Hermione does most of that." At that, Hermione blushed. They all knew that that was the closest Ron was going to get to an apology.

They stood in the doorway, where the only light spilled from Pomfrey's office from a small set of candles.

"If you need anything," Hermione said, before adding embarrassedly, "sorry about you having to witness a petty fight."

"That's all right," Jade insisted then added with a sly grin. "I'm glad you two are friends again—that I didn't want you to have to do off Dean." Harry, Hermione, and Ron exchanged quick glances, but relaxed as Jade chuckled amusedly.

"Good night," she said pleasantly and closing the door.

"Goodnight," Harry returned.

## 9. Gryffindor vs. Slytherin

Within a week, Jade had become a regular student attending classes with the Gryffindor fifth years. Despite Logan Price's predictions a month before, Jade proved more than capable in lessons, despite several courses that gave her somewhat of a hard time. She was much too easily distracted. In History of Magic, she managed to get a pop quiz postponed (much to relief of many of her classmates, excluding Hermione, of course) because she was thrilled by the idea of Professor Binns being a ghost to care about anything else. The tale of the old and boring man getting up from his body and returning to his class as if he were alive was retold. She wanted to conduct experiments like seeing if Binns could freeze water by walking through it, or if he could make himself solid. Binns, rather exasperated by the onslaught of questioning, finally threatened her with a detention if she didn't stop her rounds of curiosity.

It was nearing the end of the week, and Jade was joining Hermione, Ron, and Harry for her first Defense Against the Dark Arts class. Professor Lupin welcomed her warmly and began a lesson on manifested powers.

"Can someone please tell me what a manifestation is?" he asked. "Dean?" Dean looked up from his books.

"When cockroaches attack?" he supplied. Lupin smiled and shook his head.

"That's an *infestation*," Lupin offered (Ron smirked). "How about you, Harry?"

"Er...it's a..." Harry began, caught completely off guard. "Something taking form?"

"Very good," Lupin said happily. "Can anyone elaborate? Hermione?"

"An appearance granted by some sort of power or energy," Hermione said. Aimlessly, she flipped to the passage on metaphysical manifestations in *Beyond Magic*, one of Lupin's recommended readings. At those words, Jade looked up and met the professor's eyes. A faint, but very apparent shudder went through her body as she quickly broke eye contact. Harry blinked, wondering if he had imagined it.

"Manifested Powers are concentrated structures of magic," Lupin was saying, turning away from Jade. "Created to take the form of an object or body." He was moving away from the desk and began to list the common forms of MP (as he later referred to it) on the board.

"Generally," Lupin said, sneezing from the chalk dust, "only very powerful forms of dark magic could create MPs and therefore, their prominent reason for existence is to provide a means of destruction. It would take an incredible amount of hate to form a MP, as it takes the life of the creator." A chill suddenly crawled up Harry's spine and his gaze wandered over to Jade again. Her usually amused expression was replaced by a grim and stolid look. The chill slowly faded and Harry returned his eyes to the board, suddenly caught up in this new storm of notes. The small blast of cold was quickly forgotten and he thought it must have been a gust from the open window. Finally, the bell signaled the end of class and they gathered their things to leave.

"Dean—what a brain, isn't he though?" Ron queried, innocently gazing at Hermione.

"Ron..." she said dangerously then looked up as they exited the door. "Watch where you're going!" Ron's calm little grin was quickly wiped off his face as he collided with a girl in the hall, scattering the pile of parchments she had in her hands.

"Sorry," he muttered bending down to help pick them up.

"No its all right, Ron," Mandy Brocklehurst, a fifth year Ravenclaw said as he looked up at her...and gawked. If Hermione had changed since their first year, so had Mandy...to say the least. She was tall, slender, and curvy (enough to be noticed despite her robes), and she had allowed her immaculate, blond hair to grow very long. Very noticeable as she swept it aside and reached out for her stack of parchment. Harry recognized her as a girl who talked often with Cho or Padma Patil. Ron continued to stare. Hermione cleared her throat loudly making him and Harry jump.

"Oh," Ron stuttered handing Mandy back her things. "Sorry about that." Mandy giggled sweetly, making Hermione look inches from gagging.

"I know," Mandy replied, smiling. "You already said that."

"Heh—," Ron managed grinning back stupidly. Hermione rolled her eyes and nudged Jade who was watching too curiously to move.

"Well, I have to boost," Mandy said making a move to leave. "Good luck today, Harry."

"Yeah, thanks," Harry said gazing around to see if Cho might be around. Mandy then winked and added, "I really fancy your hair, Ron, did I tell you yet?" and she departed, as Ron's stupid grin turned into a rather satisfied smirk.

"'I really fancy your hair,'" Hermione mimicked softly, but not enough so that Harry didn't hear.  
"The only thing she knows how to fancy is a shinny objects."

"Sorry?" Jade asked confused, but Hermione shook her head and moved on. Jade shrugged.

"You hear that, Harry?" Ron said as they caught up with the girls. "She likes my hair."

"So does Malfoy," Hermione snorted.

"That's not very nice—," he said indignantly as he was interrupted by Dean.

"Ready for the game today?" Dean asked, pulling up between Harry and him.

"He always is Dean," Ron said shortly.

"We'll mow Slytherin down," Seamus added stepping in front of them and walking backwards.

"Harry!" a voice called as they descending the stairs to the Great Hall. Harry sighed dejectedly and squeezed his eyes shut. Slowly, he turned around, forcing the fallen look from his face.

"Hi Colin," he said flatly. Colin Creevey, a third year Gryffindor stood there grinning like an idiot next to his younger brother, Dennis who wore the same expression. Clutched in Colin's hands was his beloved camera. Dean and Seamus smiled weakly at Harry, and quickly brushed past with a quick hello to the Creevey brothers.

"Just wanted to wish you luck," Colin was saying brightly. He then leaned close to Harry, jutting out his thumb discretely at his brother.

"It's his first time seeing a Quidditch game," Colin explained. "Could you possibly do some of your signature loops and stunts? For effect, of course."

"Sure, anything," Harry replied quickly, before starting down the steps again with Ron, Hermione, and Jade.

"Wait!" Colin called. Harry paused waiting for the dreadful request. "How about some pre-game photos?" It came, and he cringed. He was about to refuse but noticed that Jade had stepped up very close to Colin, examining the picture-taking contraption.

"What is that?" she asked tapping the lens with her finger. Colin seemed a bit unnerved by Jade's forwardness, but attempted to recover himself.

"Oh," he said, pulling the device away from her potentially lens damaging fingers. "It's a camera, I use it to take pictures...you know put images film."

"Brilliant," Jade murmured, taking it in her hands and turning it around so the strap twisted around Colin's little neck. Colin choked and pointed at the strap and Jade let go of it sheepishly.

"Do you know how to work the camera?" she asked with a twinkle in her eye. Colin positively beamed.

“Sure do,” he said proudly. “Just ask Dennis over there. Just focus and shoot. Why don’t I take a quick picture of all of you? The three looked at Jade’s excited face and Colin’s positively beaming smile and consented. After which, Colin asked if Harry would pose with Dennis. At that Dennis squeaked incoherently.

“You know, Colin,” Harry said, “I’ll need a lot of food if I’m going to play well in an hour, perhaps we should go eat.”

“Completely understandable,” Colin said, fiddling happily with his camera, and then lowered his voice and winked. “You’ve got to have energy for all those special tricks, you do.” Colin thanked them and went back up the stairs a few steps to collect his awe-struck brother.

They continued towards the Great Hall, Jade discussing the use and functions of a camera with Hermione, but their journey was thwarted once again, this time by Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle.

“Aren’t we dead talkative this afternoon?” Malfoy said, leaning against the doorframe, eyeing Jade. They all came to a halt. “We were under the impression you were too primal to communicate,” he added, indicating his two henchmen and grinning maliciously.

Harry felt his cheeks burn, watching Crabbe and Goyle snigger. It was rich that those two goons were amused considering their pictures were probably featured under the definition of “primal”.

“Does us a favor and get lost,” Harry said, resisting the urge to beat Malfoy’s head in with his wand.

“Who’s going make me, Potter?” Malfoy shot back. “In any case, I wasn’t talking to you now, was I?” With that he stepped between Harry and Jade. She looked at him in a bemused sort of way.

“Blow off, Malfoy,” Ron said, pulling Jade away from the pale boy by the back of her robes.

“I know you,” Jade said simply, pulling away from Ron, stepping up to examine Malfoy. “You’re the boy who’s always being awful to Hagrid in Care of Magical Creatures.” Malfoy grinned rather proudly. “And you’re so pale....” Jade murmured, seemingly perplexed as she reached up to touch his face. Malfoy jerked away, insulted as Jade muttered, “a little sun would do you good.”

“I hear you’re a quick learner,” Malfoy drawled, letting malice drip from his words. “You better quickly learn that some words can get you into loads of trouble.”

“Come on, Jade,” Hermione said quietly, prodding Ron and Harry in the back. “Let’s move.”

“Stay out of this, Granger,” Malfoy snapped. Beside him, Crabbe and Goyle flared their nostrils at her. Hermione pulled herself up tall and prodded Harry and Ron a little harder as Jade fished around in her pocket.

“Always inserting your filthy inputs where its not wante—” Malfoy was hissing before being cut off by Jade, who had shoved a crème bon bon into his mouth. His eyes bulged and he choked it down.

“You bloody—whoa!” Malfoy collapsed to the ground in a puff of smoke. He cursed and called for Goyle and Crabbe to help him up. His rear had expanded to nearly the size of a small sofa. Goyle pulled Malfoy up, only to have him fall back down, Crabbe on top of him. Malfoy’s curses and loud yelling began to bring forth quite a crowd.

“I didn’t think it possible that your ass could almost be the size of your ego,” Harry announced as Ron roared with laughter. Hermione nervously glanced about for signs of a teacher.

“We’ll see the size of your ego after Slytherin kills Gryffindor today,” Malfoy spat.

“What’s going on?” Professor Dumont called from behind several seventh years that were laughing hysterically.

“Let’s go!” Hermione persisted and at last, succeeded in leading them into the Great Hall.

“You watch yourself!” Malfoy called after Jade. “I always get my revenge!”

“You want another bon bon?” Jade asked, but was quickly pulled away by Hermione and Harry. As they headed for the Gryffindor table, Ron grinned and high-fived Jade. Hermione looked as if she were fighting between being pleased and annoyed.

“Egging him on like that,” she muttered to both of them. “The best way to get to Malfoy is to ignore him.”

“The best way to get to Malfoy is to bloody knock his teeth out,” Ron replied.

“He’ll feel like they were once Harry catches the snitch first,” Jade replied. Harry grinned, quite pleased.

“Maybe all Malfoy’s bad deeds will come back to him ten-fold and he’ll fly into the Whomping Willow,” Hermione sighed.

“That’s the team spirit,” Ron said, lightly punching her in the arm.

They sat down just as Fred, George, and Lee were frantically getting up from the table. The twins and their best friend were pushing their way through a crowd that had gathered around a window overlooking the lake.

“Fred! George!” bellowed the unmistakable voice of Professor McGonagall. The Weasley twins stopped in their tracks as Lee ducked beneath the Hufflepuff table. They shrugged their identical shoulders and headed towards McGonagall and certain doom.

“What’d you guys do?” Ron asked, pushing back from the table. Fred grinned as he passed.

“Wanted to give Angelina a little heads up for the game,” he said slyly. McGongall awaited them at the end of the hall. Harry led Hermione, Ron, and Jade curiously to the crowd of people looking out a window overlooking the lake. The Weasley twins had bewitched a massive picture onto its surface of the Gryffindor Lion with words too racy to print.

“Wow,” Hermione said raising an eyebrow, looking rather impressed.” They have really got imaging charms down.”

\* \* \*

Madam Hooch was standing between the Gryffindor and Slytherin teams whistle held in her puckered lips, flying goggles on. The Slytherins were each large and more dangerous looking, save Malfoy who stood tall and small-framed. Because most of the former players had been sixth or seventh years two years ago, there were a lot of new faces on their team, not that the jutted foreheads or Neanderthal like quality changed much.

“Shake hands,” Madam Hooch said. Avery, Slytherin’s captain, grinned slyly and grabbed Angelina’s slender hand in his bear-like one. Harry saw her wince. “On my whistle....” Madam Hooch’s shrill whistle blast sent them into the air, releasing in Harry a wave of excitement. He circled high as the crowd began to cheer.

“Annnnd they’re off!” erupted Lee’s voice from the commentator’s box. “Gryffindor versus Slytherin in what promises to be the bloodiest match ever!” A muffled voice was heard and Lee quickly added rather disappointedly, “I meant exciting match ever...there will be little, if any blood.” From the ground, the four balls were released and the little golden snitch hastily disappeared. Harry circled about, half listening to Lee’s commentary.

“Slytherin in possession of the quaffle, Broch to Nott, Nott sends it to Zabini...yes! Fantastic bludger sent express owl by one of the Weasleys, Gryffindor Beater!” Harry turned effortlessly, squinting as a cold wind began to whip his robes around him.

“Oy! Snitter,” a drawling voice called from just above him. “You look a bit confused.” Harry glanced up at Malfoy and flashed a confident grin.

“Really?” he asked. “You must be hallucinating, not unlikely considering all that thinking you’ve been doing lately.”

“A real character, aren’t you?” Malfoy shot back.

“Is there a reason why you’re up here?” Harry asked, pretending to look suddenly surprised. “I mean... it can’t be because you actually play well.” Draco’s face contorted and his gray eyes seem to flash in the sun.

“Bell’s got the quaffle and is heading straight for the goal!” Lee announced as the Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs, and Ravenclaws began to cheer. “But...watch out! Nott, Slytherin Chaser is on her tail!” Harry saw the large chaser charging after Katie twenty feet below him.

Harry forced himself to free-fall at an angle towards the larger player. Malfoy grunted and followed in suit, thinking that Harry had spotted the snitch. He gathered speed, nearly pressing his face against the smooth handle of his broom as the large figure of Nott drew closer. Malfoy was close behind, his hair flying wildly as he began to catch up.

“Wait a split second, I think Potter’s caught sight of the snitch!” Lee shouted, momentarily loosing interest in Katie’s progress. “Yes, he’s gone into a dive, with Malfoy of Slytherin right behind him!” Harry put on another burst of speed and Malfoy fell back temporarily, before drawing a foot from level. Within inches of Nott, Harry pulled to the left, grazing the top of Nott’s wind swept hair. Malfoy didn’t catch the move and slammed into his fellow team member. Nott cursed loudly and pushed the smaller boy aside. Malfoy turned and glared at Harry, his silvery hair glinting maliciously in the wintry sunlight.

“Avery’s been blind sighted by his own Seeker! But wait...yes! Bell makes the first goal of the game!” Lee howled along with the stadium, while a small section (Slytherins) jeered. Even from far above, Harry could make out Dumbledore waving a quidditch banner happily. Harry grinned as he watched the scoreboard. He turned his attention back to his search for the snitch, but was interrupted by a funny growling sound. He looked up and saw what made his insides curdle: Millicent Bulstrode...a Slytherin Beater.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he muttered.

She growled again and made towards him with club in hand.

“Oh sh—” Harry ducked, feeling the small bat graze his hair. “I’m not a bludger!” He yelled flying away from the massive girl. She was only stopped by a bludger to the head (where the least damage could’ve been done) by George.

“Thanks!” Harry called as Bulstrode hovered, looking confused, several yards off course.

“Slytherin’s quaffle, sent out by Keeper Morder, to Zabini, Slytherin Chaser, Zabini to Nott, Gryffindor Keeper, Finnigan is out in attempts to get the quaffle...DAMN BASTARD, THAT’S A FOUL!”

“JORDAN!” McGonagall’s magically magnified voice cut through the air. Nott had attempted to plow right through Seamus, sending the smaller boy spinning.

“Sorry, Freudian slip, Professor!” Lee replied. “Anyway, Madam Hooch calls a foul (good girl!) And Johnson takes it. Brilliant! Its in, no contest, 20 to zero, Gryffindor!” The stands began to rumble with the cheering of the crowd.

“The quaffle’s back in Slytherin possession, Zabini to Nott, Nott back to Zabini, Finigan tries to block the shot and, no butter beer...a goal for Slytherin.” Harry grimaced, shoving his hair out of his eyes and turning his head towards his right, just in time to see a speeding bludger bearing down on him. Apparently Millicent’s memory span exceeded that of ten minutes.

“Ack!” Harry swung his entire body upside down to avoid a hit. The black ball passed overhead and Fred pulled up quickly, panting as he waved his club about.

“Sorry,” he said, “you okay?”

“Fine,” Harry said, fixing his glasses, which had fallen askew. “Just got the living day lights scared—”

“Duck!” Fred suddenly cried out dropping several feet. Harry slumped down again, as the same Bludger speed by and slammed into Avery.

“Oops,” George said flying over to them. “You two not dead, right?” Fred shook his head.

“You’re supposed to aim at them, not your own team members!”

“I got the git,” George replied grinning, swinging the bat in his hands.

“And a WICKED block by Gryffindor newbie, Finnigan!” Lee shouted, catching their attention. Katie and Alicia had just flown up beside Seamus and kissed him on the check.

“If only I was that lucky,” George murmured thoughtfully. “I nail a Slytherin and all I get is complaining.”

“If only I was that lucky,” Lee sighed. “I commentate with charisma and all I get is Professor McGonagall...er...McGonagall’s company. Heh... sweet dear, and always forgiving, is that a new hat? Looks stunning on you, Professor—.”

“MISTER JORDAN!” McGonagall replied. “EYES ON THE GAME.”

“Sorry,” Lee replied guiltily. “It was just that the temptation of commenting on that wonderful hat was overwhelming and—,”

“The game, Jordan,” McGonagall supplied wearily.

“Oh, yeah...right, looks like Finnigan sends out the quaffle, and it’s under possession of the Slytherins...” Suddenly a tiny flicker of light caught Harry’s eye.

“Gotta fly,” he said as he rounded around the twins. Malfoy was near the Gryffindor goalposts and didn’t notice that Harry had begun circling an area over the right corner of the field. Suddenly Harry saw the little flutter of wings, and the adrenaline began to pump through his veins. He dived towards it.

“Nott’s got the quaffle and is going straight towards Finnigan, Finnigan flies out in attempts to block it...” Harry’s full concentration was on the tiny little flicker, and he didn’t notice that Avery had spotted his signature dive, and started to charge after him.

“And it looks like Potter’s spotted the snitch on the right end of the field, and Nott is still on a steady path through Finnigan...Oh god...they’re not stopping....” The Snitch was inches from Harry’s hand; he could feel the flutter of wings bat frantically against his fingers.

“Finnigan move!” Lee shouted just as Harry’s hand wrapped around the snitch. He turned in time to see Seamus and Nott collide with a sickening crunch. Harry gasped, wincing as he swiftly swung his broom towards the Gryffindor end of the pitch. Seamus fell the several feet to the ground and lay very still.

“You bloody bastard! You killed him!” Lee was hollering. He was spared castration by McGonagall’s speedy flight to the pitch. “Seamus!” Angelina was yelling over and over again as she scrambled off her broom, followed closely by Katie.

“Please be okay,” Alicia mumbled as she closely followed with Fred beside her. Several Slytherins, including Malfoy had gathered around. The faintest smile was on his lips.

“Finnigan?” Madam Hooch said as she knelt down beside him. “Can you hear me, boy?” Harry pushed forward just as a groan escaped his team member.

“Ow,” Seamus muttered to the relief of his teammates. He rolled over, revealing his rather mangled looking arm. It was bent in the wrong direction and the elbow was actually backwards. A piece of bone was poking out of the reddening flesh.

“Oh,” Katie murmured and turned around to retch.

“Its okay,” Seamus said. “Just a flesh wound.” He was about to take a gander at it himself when McGonagall stopped him.

“Don’t look at it,” she said sternly, conjuring up a stretcher.

“Wicked!” Seamus gasped looking at it. “Look at the bone!” George grinned and leaned over to get a better look.

“Looks like you made a new joint!” George replied giving Seamus a thumbs-up.

“Oh man,” Dean said out of breath, as he tumbled onto the field towards his best friend. “You okay, mate?” Seamus nodded and Dean breathed a sigh of relief. Seamus was helped onto the stretcher and as he lay back down he caught sight of Harry.

“Did you get it?” he asked excitedly.

“Yeah, I got it.” He raised the snitch into the air and heard Lee whoop. Seamus waved to the crowd with his good arm.

“Potter has the snitch, and Finnigan is alive! Gryffindor takes the win, 170 to 10!” The silent crowd suddenly erupted into cheers.

Up in the stands, Jade stood absolutely straight, hands wrapped around Hagrid’s massive fingers.

“Er...Jade?” he asked suddenly looking a bit pained. “Meh fingers?”

“What?” she asked still gazing straight at the pitch. “Oh...sorry.” She released his fingers and watched as he wiggled them about, trying to regain some feeling.

“That’s quite a grip yeh’ve got,” Hagrid muttered, wincing as he looked through his binoculars towards the pitch.

“Seamus is all right!” Hermione squealed as Dean high-fived him down on the field.

“And we won! Go Harry!” Ron whooped, jumping up and down.

“What happened to him?” Jade asked seemingly confused. “Why didn’t he just get up?” Hagrid looked at her through his furry brows.

“Well he got hurt,” Hagrid said surprised. “Yeh wouldn’t be jumpin’ around after falling a good eight feet and breakin’ yeh arm now, would yeh?”

“But...” Jade insisted before being cut off by Ron who was already making for the stairs.

“Come on, let’s go meet the team.” Hermione sighed and took hold of Jade’s arm, pulling her away from their seats.

“Alright then, I’ll be seein’ you lot later,” Hagrid called as they waved and made for the castle. “spect the morder’s are needin’ a good feedin’. Looks like Seamus is all right.”

\* \* \*

After Seamus was made comfortable in the infirmary, Madam Pomfrey went in search of several key ingredients for a cleansing ointment. As soon as she disappeared down the hall, the Gryffindor team along with Hermione, Ron, Dean, and Jade tumbled in around Seamus’s bed.

“Sheesh, Angelina,” Fred said grinning at Seamus, “he’d follow your order to the bloody death.” Angelina rolled her eyes and leaned on her broom.

“It was a great attempt Seamus, but I wish you didn’t try to body block Nott,” she said thoughtfully, ignoring Fred. “He looks the size of Azkaban.” Seamus grinned.

“But then I wouldn’t have this awesome battle wound,” Seamus exclaimed. Alicia laughed and kissed him on the cheek as Katie leaned against the wall, looking a bit green.

“You guys want to see it?” he asked. “McGonagall couldn’t pop the bone back in yet.” He winced as he lifted up one end of the gauze that was holding his arm to a splint. Sure enough, a jagged piece of bone was popping straight out of puckered skin. Most of the guys pressed in as Hermione clamped her eyes shut, seemingly sympathizing with Katie. It was pretty gruesome.

“Neat how it just pokes out,” Ron noted attentively.

“I couldn’t break my arm better,” George announced. Jade stood beside Harry and Hermione, staring at Seamus intensely; a thin line of sweat was upon his brow and his eyes crinkled as he breathed shallowly through his teeth.

“Does it feel like anything?” Jade asked curiously. Seamus grinned and nodded.

“Hurts like hell.” Jade looked as if she were contemplating the response.

“What does it feel like, to ‘hurt like hell’?” she asked oddly. Seamus stared at her as if she were something he had never seen before, wiping away some sweat with his hand.

“It just doesn’t feel good,” he supplied, glancing quizzically at Harry.

“Can I touch it?” Jade asked.

“No!” Seamus replied quickly, looking startled by the request. Just then, Madam Pomfrey bustled in, arms laden with gauze and potions.

“I can’t turn my back before all of you just come barging in to bother my patient!” she exclaimed. “I’ve got work to do, and he needs rest, if you’ll all please leave.”

“I’m okay,” Seamus said looking up at his friends and team members.

“Not by the look of that arm,” she returned. Defeated, Angelina began to lead the team members out.

“It was really brave what you did, though,” Jade said as she turned to leave. Seamus forced an appreciative grin before turning his attention back to Dean who was giving him the play by play of “The Crunch”. He didn’t finish as one reproving look from Pomfrey sent him packing towards the door.

“See you later,” Dean called to Seamus, following Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Jade out. As they left, they distinctly heard Madam Pomfrey mutter, “you’d think by now they’d think of a sport closer to the ground.”

\* \* \*

Classes ended early for the day, and most of the Gryffindors could be found lounging about the common room, full from pirated food provided by the Weasley twins. The party that had been ongoing for the past three hours had at last started to die down. Now Hermione was attempting to bring a high polish to her Prefect badge and Ron was slyly sending spotting charms on the side that faced away from her. Harry watched amusedly as she shook her head, turning the badge around and around.

“I don’t get it,” she murmured, “I swear I just polished this side.” Jade and Harry sniggered and returned to their introductory game of chess.

“What?” Hermione asked suspiciously.

“Nothing,” Harry said lightly, grinning. After several more attempts to remove the spots from the badge, she gave up and tossed down the polishing rag.

“Checkmate,” Jade said as Harry’s king threw down its crown.

“Good for you,” Ron said to Jade. “See Harry? I’m not the only one who beats you; you’re a natural Chess loser.” Harry rolled his eyes and tossed a well-aimed pawn at him.

“Do you guys want to do anything?” Harry asked, hastily adding, “That’s not homework, of course.” Hermione raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms.

“Actually, I wanted to go see Professor Dumbledore today,” Jade spoke up, getting up from her armchair.

“What about?” Ron asked sitting up. Jade shrugged and for the first time, looked a bit uncomfortable.

"I just wanted to ask him something," she replied. "I've never seen blood before—it's so—bloody." Ron raised an eyebrow and Harry remembered how unusually curious Jade had seemed about Seamus's injury.

"You don't remember ever getting hurt, do you?" Harry asked slowly. Jade studied the lines in the palm of her hand.

"No," she supplied.

"It's okay," Hermione said reassuringly. "You only just now remembered how to speak." Jade stood there in silence for a bit, before nodding her agreement.

"You know, I just haven't brought the Headmaster up to date with my lessons and things. It's been a week since I've started classes, and I have yet to tell him about any of them."

"Can I come with?" Ron asked. "It's dead boring now that Hermione's finished polishing her badge."

"Yeah," Jade grinned.

"Wait a second," Hermione said suddenly eyeing Ron suspiciously. "What do you mean by it being dead boring now that I've finished polishing my badge?"

"Er..." He looked at Harry for help. Harry, in turn, quickly looked around for a distraction to find Jade making her way out of the entrance hole.

"Jade, one second," he and Ron called in unison as Hermione shrugged and followed.

\* \* \*

They recounted the game as they walked and Jade excitedly dissected the plays as if she knew them by heart. It seemed that from watching Harry practice, she had memorized a handful of them. A quarter of an hour later, they reached the stone Gargoyle that stood guard at the entrance of Dumbledore's office. Jade said the password (Fizzing Whizzbees) and Harry, Hermione, Ron and herself stepped onto the moving staircase that circled upward. They reached a stone landing but found that the door to the Headmaster's office was open, so that they could look in at the scene before them. In the fireplace against one wall was the floating head of Cornelius Fudge. Jade gasped surprised, but suppressed it, her eyes wide as she examined the face in the flames. They were not heard however. A tall man with a top hat and blond hair was standing rigid in front of Dumbledore, blocking the headmaster from view.

"She's a proposed threat!" the man said, his gray eyes aflame.

"Please Albus," Fudge was saying. He was looking more harassed with every passing second. "Realize we don't understand her...er...situation enough to truly know if you can handle her." Dumbledore's face was grim, set solid as stone.

"I understand that she is composed of flesh as any of us," Dumbledore responded unfazed by the growing animosity in Price's voice. "And that she harbors human emotion...she has friends here."

"I don't know if the Ministry can take the judgment of a man who works with a Death Eater...that could lend a way for Voldemort to find her," the man stated rather coldly.

"Severus Snape is doing more than the entire Ministry in the fight against Voldemort," Dumbledore acknowledged with an icy edge. "And besides, it's been destroyed. She couldn't have any connections with it." The man flinched and Fudge gulped so loudly that it resounded around the room.

"Who are they talking about?" Ron mouthed to Harry and Hermione. Harry shrugged, and glanced at Jade beside him. She stood there, silent, watching the scene before her. Her eyes were set so that they were blank, unlit by the fire that had possessed them in class or her first night at Hogwarts. She was grasping her jade pendant.

"Cornelius," Dumbledore began, looking into the light of the fire, "her chances of suppression are better here in a school where she is one of many, than out in the open where she could be pin-pointed; snatched instantly."

"But the risk," Cornelius responded with a wavering voice. "What's not to say that she really is heartless? That she can be? Think of Harry Potter!"

"It's not her that's a danger," the lanky man in front of Dumbledore said throwing an arm out vehemently, "it's what she could very well be capable of. She belongs somewhere where she can be monitored."

"That somewhere will be here," Dumbledore stated in a tone that easily closed the argument. "And I'm sure Cornelius understands that this move would be made towards the Ministry's interest. You have more important matters at hand right now." The Minister looked slightly abashed, but apparently was considering all those times he sought Albus Dumbledore's advise. He cleared his throat and looked nervously from man to man.

"There are other matters to be cared for right now, Mr. Price," Fudge finally stated flatly, the flames around his head dancing. The man in the top hat grew quiet and pushed back his broad shoulders. The Minister cleared his throat.

"Perhaps you're right on this one Dumbledore," the Minister of Magic muttered. "For god's sake, Logan, anyone can see she's human."

"I think we all understand that old magic is not one to be easily predictable," Price said slowly. "I'll have my assistant Weasley arrange another meeting, Headmaster."

"So let us just wait and see," Dumbledore said placidly.

"Fine," he said steadily in a low voice. He snatched up his top hat and cane and turned to meet the eyes of the four in the doorway. "What are you lot doing up here? What did you hear?" his voice had softened a bit when his eyes set on the impassive face of Jade.

"We came to visit, well Jade wanted to visit and..." Hermione began.

"Yeah, actually we came along to keep her company," Ron was trying to conclude. Dumbledore looked at them and caught Harry's eye.

"Sorry Professor," Harry said, trying to look less conspicuous. "We didn't mean to..."

"What did you hear?" the man repeated his hat forgotten in one hand. His question was directed solely at Jade. She stared at him, her dark eyes dull. Suddenly, her hand fell from her pendant and she turned on her heels, walking quickly down the passageway.

"Jade, wait!" Dumbledore called, emerging from behind his desk.

"Students hearing this news," Fudge was saying in the background. "Definitely not what I intended. Albus, I'll have to put this through the committee again...they won't like this...and a word of warning...they won't stand for the way you're running this school much longer."

"Good day, Cornelius," Dumbledore finally said. "They can say what they please, but I no longer take their reckless orders." With out so much as a farewell, the Minister's head disappeared. Dumbledore smoothed his robes and faced the three still standing in the doorway.

"Please come in," he said, and then reading the confused faces, motioned to the tall man. His face had soften considerably, though his eyes remained a subzero gray. "This is Logan Price, an agent of the Ministry...he's helping in locating Jade's parents."

"I'm sorry she had to hear that," Logan said pushing his way past the three. He walked a few steps before placing the hat on his head and turning around. Looking up with a dull look in his eye and spoke to Dumbledore.

"I think you're telling half truths and whole lies, Headmaster."

Price continued down the stairs with the Headmaster staring after him, and Harry saw in him a profound sadness for the leaving man.

"Price...I knew that name was familiar," Ron muttered. "Percy was going on about him all summer...says he's a real professional. A real prick if you ask me." From the hall, a stumbling bump was heard, followed by a moment of silence. There were two hastily muttered apologies, before Professor Dumont flew into the room.

"What was he doing here?" she exclaimed with clarity in her face often absent during lessons.

"He was sent by the Ministry...to give news of the search for Jade's family," Dumbledore said. He didn't seem surprised by the harassed look on her face.

"You know him?" Hermione asked. Dumont didn't turn her eyes away from where Price had exited.

"Knew him," she corrected hotly. Then with a shake of head, her absentmindedness returned. "I'm sorry Professor, please excuse my intrusion." With that, she left quietly without Dumbledore making a single suggestion that her entrance was strange. His attention returned to them.

"What did you all hear?" he asked rather wearily, but in a manner that eased them back into reality.

"Something about taking someone away," Hermione said. "They're not going to take Jade away, are they?" Dumbledore's fire lit behind his eyes.

"Not as long as I'm Headmaster," he said with vehemence.

"You said something about her being in danger," Harry said, swallowing before he continued. "The Minister mentioned my name...in reference with Jade and...Voldemort." Dumbledore shook his head and slumped into his chair. Harry was chilled by the tired look in the old man's face.

"Harry, Hermione, Ron..." he said pressing his fingertips together, "I don't think any one of you knows that by creating this friendship with Jade, you are saving her...in so many ways." He paused and looked up at the three. Little did Harry know, Dumbledore with staring at them in awe of their maturity. He could see the growth in their eyes; the wisdom forced upon them that many of their fellow students had yet to cultivate; especially in Harry.

"Jade's in a peculiar situation right now," Dumbledore continued. "The Ministry can only do so much in trying to locate where she came from. For now, they don't know anything about her, and at a time of so much turmoil, questionable situations are not generally accepted. They want to take her away to make sure she is only what she appears to be. That is their connection between her and Voldemort...suspicion of even the most innocent of people."

"She's just a girl," Harry said, heat building in his words. "Why are they wasting so much energy trying to take her away instead of fighting Voldemort?" Ron flinched and Hermione tried to look unfazed.

"There are so many questions, Harry," Dumbledore said. "Too many for even you to ask right now; too many that I cannot give answers to. That's all I'm sharing with you three today. Anything else is based on too little evidence to dispel...for now perhaps you should find Jade...I'm afraid she's a bit uncomfited by the ministry's want to tear her away from friends." Hermione and Ron quietly wished the old man a good day and began to head for the door. Harry didn't follow. Dumbledore had yet to answer his question about his own link to Jade...why Fudge would even suggest her presence was a danger to him.

"Harry," Dumbledore said seeming to read his mind. "I will share with you when its time...you still trust me enough to know that, don't you?" For a second, the slightest bit of shame filled Harry's stomach.

"I just can't let her disappear," Harry replied. The words surprised him.

"I know you won't," Dumbledore replied. "Go and find her...tell her that she does have a place in the world...right here with us."

\* \* \*

Harry, Ron, and Hermione searched through the castle for Jade in relative silence. Nearly an hour passed, and they nearly gave up on finding her when a scream and a blasting clanking rang through the halls. Their heads whipped around and they raced around the far corner of the corridor.

"Peeves!" Harry exclaimed angrily. The mischievous poltergeist was peeling his self off the wall, and below him was the remains of a suit of armor that looked nothing short of scrap metal—it was still smoking. Jade was sitting among the mess with legs sprawled in front of her in complete shock. Hermione stepped forward and helped her to her feet, gapping a little at the mess.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked worriedly. Jade still looked a bit astonished and said nothing, nodding her head slightly instead.

"Get on out of here!" Ron bellowed at Peeves who peeled himself from the wall. With a quick shake, his body had inflated itself to its normal width.

"Just doing my turn in welcoming the witch," Peeves spat rather sourly.

"Piss off or I'll call the Baron," Ron insisted, eyes narrowing. Peeves swallowed and straightened a bit.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm going...can't have a little fun...think maybe if they have a pulse they might have a sense of humor..." he vanished into the wall.

"Jade?" Harry asked gripping her elbow. She turned to face him, eyes still wide. "Are you okay?"

"I didn't...I don't understand," she said rather incoherently. "He said...he said he heard Snape saying I was the missing link in the Dark Lord's success." The three of them faced her, and Harry could tell he wasn't the only one to grow cold.

"Peeves," Hermione started shakily, "he'll say anything to upset people."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, pushing the feeling to the bottom of his stomach.

"But didn't I...?" Jade tried to say, pointing to the still-smoking bits of armor around her. She didn't finish.

"No," Harry stated firmly. "It wasn't your fault."

"What's going on here?" Filch appeared from behind a tapestry. "What are you all doing?" He caught sight of the smoking catastrophe before him. "You damn kids! Why are you always making messes?" He stopped and eyed Jade suspiciously. "Barely here two months and you get yourself into the troublemaker's group."

"It wasn't us Mr. Filch," Hermione spoke up. "Peeves was up to no good again." Filches eyes narrowed.

"If it's not the kids, it's that menace," Filch spat. Mrs. Norris had appeared by his side and seemed to be agreeing with him, her eyes narrowing with his. "I'll have to report this to the Headmaster...won't be long till that thorn in my side is deported." He shooed them away and began to clean while cursing to himself. Hermione led them through the hall and down the stairs.

"You got to admit that Peeves is getting creative," Ron said stepping through the rubble. "I mean blowing up armor...that's definitely new."

Jade didn't reply and Harry and Hermione cast glances at each other just as Lupin appeared from one end of the corridor.

"What happened?" he asked concerned upon seeing the ruins. Jade shrugged, never looking up at him. Lupin stood still for a moment and then moved towards them eyes now fixed on the girl.

"Peeves was screwing around again, Professor," Ron offered.

"He called me the missing link..." Jade murmured. Harry, Ron, and Hermione glanced at her questionably, but it was obvious the statement was made perfectly clear to the Professor. He reached out and lifted Jade's chin so that her dark eyes finally met his own.

"In time you'll decide who you are," he said, before quickly pulling back his hand. He shifted his wait hesitantly before nodding to them politely." Well," he said suddenly into the silence that followed, "Professor Dumbledore is expecting me. Perhaps you all would care to have tea later this afternoon?" Jade nodded as Lupin moved toward the other end of the hall. "I'll see you all later then in my classroom." Harry's brow's knitted and he quickly caught up with Remus, taking his arm. The touch startled the man, and he stopped to face Harry, gently removing his arm from his grip.

"You know things," Harry said quietly.

"I'd be lying if I said you were wrong," Lupin replied.

"Its ridiculous thinking she's dangerous," he replied trying to make meaning of the snippets of information he had. Lupin pursed his lips then moved forward.

"Over tea Harry, over tea."

With that he disappeared from the hallway. Harry watched him depart before turning to join the others in the midst of the clutter.

They arrived in the Common Room a little later and after several games of Gobbstones played rather half-heartedly, Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Jade departed again, making their way to Lupin's classroom. They walked in silence, Jade looking as if she were cloaked in confusion.

"Come on," Ron finally said looking at her sideways. "Cheer up! You're not bothered by the Peeves thing still, right?" Jade looked up at him and sighed.

"No, not entirely," she said but it seemed a failed attempt at a lie. Hermione caught it and patted Jade on the shoulder.

"Its that combined with what we overheard," Hermione said, "about the Ministry wanting you to go, isn't it?"

"Put simply it's the pits," Jade muttered averting her eyes. Harry wondered if by that, she meant what he felt about her place there at Hogwarts. Jade looked up and saw the rather serious looking crew and attempted a rather discomfited smile. They reached Lupin's office and Harry rapped his knuckles on the door.

"Come in," he called from inside. "Actually, just meet me in the classroom." They entered the door that led to their defense classroom that was adjacent to the office. It was dusty and several cages lined one wall. Strange little squeaks emitted from under their covers and Harry and the others quickly edged away from them. From the office, the sounds of shuffling boxes and several dull thuds were heard. Lupin poked his head out from it after stumbling over a carton of books.

"Hello," he said with a welcoming smile. "Just getting a bit of hot water. We'll enjoy it out in the classroom where I dare say, there's more room." Harry grinned seeing several piles of papers and boxes that littered even the doorway of the office. When the water was boiling, they all helped in transporting the chipped mugs and steaming tea to a table in which Ron and Harry had added five chairs.

As they settled and began sipping from their steaming mugs, Lupin cleared his throat.

"The Headmaster has informed me that you all overheard the Ministry argument with him," he said glancing at their faces. Jade seemed to slump down into her chair.

"They're not really going to try and take her away, are they?" Harry asked. "Not when she's finally getting some of her memory back." Lupin looked at Jade rather grimly, but smiled in attempts to comfort her.

"Not as long as Professor Dumbledore is Headmaster." Jade flashed a quick smile and returned to her tea.

"But why do they feel that her safety is endangered here?" Hermione spoke up before adding under her breath, "Like the Ministry could do a better job." She looked up rather horrified at her heated outburst. Lupin laughed.

“That must be Ron’s doing,” he replied. Ron grinned proudly. Lupin paused for a second as if considering. “Returning to your question, Hermione, the Ministry feels that the recent murders and acts of terrorisms are due to its failure to adhere to Dumbledore’s and Harry’s warning about Voldemort’s uprising. They still don’t believe that Voldemort has truly risen, but they do believe that the rumors are fueling the Death-Eaters.”

“But what does this have to do with Jade?” Ron queered.

“It is a time that the Ministry fears any risk, big or minuscule,” Lupin continued. “This is fueled not only by the recent attacks but also because the wizarding world has placed a bit of blame on the Ministry for the outcome of last year’s events here at Hogwarts.” Lupin paused glancing at Harry with a look of sincere apology in his brown eyes. Harry avoided the look and stared into the gray liquid in his mug.

“Go on,” he said, forcing any sign of emotion out of his voice.

“They feel that Jade is a risk being taken at Hogwarts because it is uncertain as to whether her parents are into the Dark Arts, if she herself is influenced by black magic, or if she may be the daughter, niece, relation of a prominent figure in Voldemort’s circle, however small the chances be. The Ministry feels that in times like this, they must take all precaution against the unknown. And I completely agree with all of you for I know what you’re thinking; it’s a ridiculously far-fetched suspicion.”

“The Ministry is going out on a limb to rip a girl away from her friends because of some outlandish theory that she’s evil?” Ron exclaimed. “When they won’t give a second thought about the possibility that You-Know-Who has risen? Bloody hell, we’ve got monkey’s running our government.”

“Monkeys?” Lupin murmured thoughtfully. “It sounds like you’re putting an emphasis on muggle studies, Ron.”

“Hermione’s doing,” he said, scowling in return

“Could I really hurt people like they say?” Jade asked surprising Harry because she had been wholly silent the entire time. Lupin was silent which drew all eyes on him. He sipped from his mug before attentively examining its contents.

“Yes,” he replied looking up at the girl, “as we are all capable of as human beings. What makes you a friend and a person of compassion is that you have no desire to hurt anyone.” Suddenly a flood of understanding colored her face.

“But what about Peeves?” she questioned. “Didn’t I want to hurt him?” At that Harry laughed. He was sure everyone but Dumbledore wanted to hurt Peeves.

“I don’t think he can even get hurt,” Harry said. “Being a poltergeist and all.”

“So that Peeves didn’t feel pain, like Seamus?” Jade asked leaning back into her chair. Harry looked at her curiously; again with her inquisitiveness about the most basic of human feelings.

“She doesn’t remember ever getting hurt,” Hermione explained to Lupin. “Even after being in the Forest.”

“Madam Pomfrey said all she had was exhaustion,” Ron noted turning his gaze on Jade. “There wasn’t a scratch on you.”

“It doesn’t make sense, does it?” Jade muttered heatedly.

“Not many things in the world do,” Lupin said. “Whatever made you loose your memory is a mystery to us as well as to you, and there could have been many circumstances that led you out of the Forest safely.” He peered at her from above the rim of his cup as he drank the last of his tea. “I think this is one of those times Fate has played a role, and in that, you should not feel as if you don’t belong here even if the Ministry thinks you don’t. Dumbledore, I, and many others certainly believe you do.” Harry, Ron, and Hermione nodded and voiced their agreement.

“Well, I hope that cleared many questions up.” Lupin glanced at Harry who nodded appreciatively.

"Thank you so much, Professor," Jade spoke up firmly, "really, you've helped loads." Lupin waved his hand as if to say nothing at all and began to collect the mugs.

"If you'll excuse me," he said. "Evening approaches." With that he glanced out towards the darkening sky and hurried them out. Ron, Hermione, and Harry had seen their teacher transform from man to werewolf before. It wasn't pretty and they respected Lupin's reclusive habits during that time of the month (hey! Stop laughing!). They all said their thank yous and good-byes as they departed.

\* \* \*

Ignoring Hermione's reminders of the O.W.Ls, the four of them set out to explore a newly discovered art room. Ron had found one painting in particular rather enjoyable. Truthfully, Harry liked it a lot too. It hung in one corner of the little gallery and was of a dancing veela. Both Harry and Ron were gazing at her as she did her enchanting dance and fluttered her eyelashes at them. Hermione rolled her eyes and raised an eyebrow at Jade who returned her gaze curiously.

"Oh look," Hermione said non-chalantly. "Dinner time."

At that, Ron's attention was ripped away from the painting.

"Bloody hell!" he exclaimed. "We're going to be late!"

"What was that?" Harry murmured dreamily as the veela waved at him.

"Oy! Come on!" Ron practically yelled, grabbing hold of Harry's collar, pulling him towards the door.

"Let go!" Harry exclaimed nearly knocked off his feet.

"Really," Hermione said rather amused following them as they disappeared out the door. "Ron's just a stomach on legs."

"Long legs, thank god," Ron retorted from the hallway still dragging Harry. "I hope there's still some Shepard's pie left."

The girls lagged behind and Ron had succeeded in dragging Harry nearly a whole floor ahead of them.

"Ron," Harry said trying to escape his friend's clutches. "I promise if you let me go, I'll walk fast." Ron obliged reluctantly. They rounded a corner just as Harry caught sight of Snape and Dumont; he pulled Ron back around the corner.

"The Ministry's right on this one," Dumont was saying. "She can't stay here, not if we are to preserve the safety of the students." Snape shifted and looked positively ill.

"You don't know it's her—she's human, isn't she?" he dropped his voice so that Ron and Harry couldn't make out what he was saying. "And she may be a danger, but just think of how much more danger will befall everyone if the Guardian falls into the wrong hands."

"Logan's right this time," Dumont pressed. "Professor, you know I don't trust him as far as I can throw him, you know that. But I think he understands."

"Logan Price has never been in the right frame of mind to understand anything," Snape replied, this time with heat in his voice. "There's no telling how he'll act if he gets *control* of this situation."

"Professor," Dumont began, but was cut off by the Potions Masters.

"I trust Dumbledore, Professor Dumont," he muttered. "That's enough." With that he disappeared down the hall, leaving the woman to stare after him. Ron glanced at Harry and raised an eyebrow. He watched as Dumont stamped her foot passionately before hastily departing.

"I don't think we should tell Jade about this," Harry said quietly to Ron.

"Right," Ron agreed. "It'd be a bit much."

"What makes that Dumont woman so important she can have a say in what Dumbledore supports?" Harry asked heatedly.

"It's bad enough the Ministry wants Jade out," Ron muttered. Harry swallowed and led the way down the hall. "There's no way Jade's dangerous," Ron was saying. "Just because she can't remember..." Harry felt a surge of anger pulse through him.

"She's not," Harry agreed with vehemence. "She's proven that with her friendship." He paused and looked at Ron. "What did Snape mean when he said 'danger will befall everyone if the Guardian falls in the wrong hands'? That doesn't make any sense at all, does it?"

"I don't think we're getting the whole picture," Ron offered, which Harry found logical enough, though he felt that there was something ominous behind the Snape's words.

"We figured you'd be plowing through some pudding or another by now," Jade called from a stairway behind them. Ron nudged Harry before he turned, shrugging stiffly.

"Waiting for you two pokies to hurry up," he replied grinning.

"Come on," Harry added. "I'm famished."

\* \* \*

That night, Harry lay in bed listening to the snores and steady breathing of his dorm mates. He couldn't sleep with all the information (and the lack thereof) running through his mind. Even though the most trustworthy of people gave him enough valid explanations, Harry couldn't help but feel that he was missing out on some answers. His mind wandered and he began to dwell on the dreams that had haunted his slumber those handfuls of weeks before. They had disappeared ever since Jade came along, and he had yet to have anymore. He kind of missed them, because he felt that they were a link to his parents. That was how James and Lily were suppose to be; brave, adventurous, and most of all, alive. Anger swelled in him and he felt that he could have been quite capable of ripping Voldemort into shreds. Coming back to reality, Harry sighed and turned over, his vision blurred because his glasses lay on his bedside bureau.

He would write Sirius another letter, insisting that it was time he knew the parts his parents played in life. Maybe then he could determine the significance of those dreams, for he knew that it wasn't the end of them, merely a pause. But then again, maybe they would be nothing at all. At least then, he thought, he could forget about them guiltlessly and move on.

## 10. Revelations

Harry held the letter in his hands, attempting to prevent the wind from ripping it away from his fingers. He was outside on one of the eastern balconies of the castle reading a reply from Sirius to a letter he had sent two weeks prior. Upon receiving it at breakfast, he had stuffed it into his trouser pocket before Hermione, Ron, or Jade could question him about it. At that moment, they were in the Great Hall having lunch and Harry was supposedly returning a book to the library. He wanted this letter to be his own.

*Dear Harry,*

*I'm sorry it has been awhile. I understand that your curiosity about your parents is troubling you and I apologize for giving you the run around. It's just that I'm afraid that if you knew of their zeal for their cause, you might feel it your responsibility to contribute to it. They were courageous, strong, and two of the most important people in the wizardry world. When the time allows, I'll not only tell you what they were but what made them such prominent figures in our lives, but I'd like us to be face to face. I've been updated on this Hogwarts' "guest" from Dumbledore. I hear she's actually acting more like a normal human being. Once again, please be wary of her. The seemingly innocent mysteries are often the most dangerous.*

*Take Care,*

*Sirius*

Harry read the words again, and when he was finished, he studied the ink splotches and rather scrawled writing that signified Black's lack of time. Harry was worried, knowing that his godfather was involved in Dumbledore's war against Voldemort, but he couldn't help but feel slightly angry at Sirius's blatant skirting of his question. On top of that, the mysterious warnings about Jade were getting on his nerves.

But at least for now, Harry knew that his parents were important in the fight against the Dark Arts fourteen years ago. He knew that their deaths were of the most prideful of kinds, though it angered him as he thought of those murders a few weeks ago. Knowing that Voldemort had indeed risen because of him, Harry wondered if his parents' deaths were in vain. He didn't dwell long on that thought, knowing that until he had received information from Sirius, he would only be chasing a shadow that would simply lead him nowhere. His eyes flickered over the letter once more. And then there was that warning about Jade...

"Harry?"

He was ripped from his thoughts as Jade approached him, easing open the large glass door, her dark hair caught in the wind. He stuffed the letter into his robes and turned to meet her.

"What are you doing up here?" he asked pushing her inside. "It's freezing."

"I guess I could ask you the same thing," she replied. "The library's in the opposite direction." Harry felt the blood rush to his face and he turned to look down the hall.

"Yeah, I knew that," he said shrugging. Jade grinned at him and he forced his own lips to form a smile.

"Oh and another thing's going to hamper your success," she added as he stood there almost guiltily.

"What's that?" Harry asked.

"Not having the book you're suppose to return," she replied handing him a copy of *Herbology: A Basic Study Guide*. "I thought you might need that in your pilgrimage to return it." Harry laughed and took the book from her. Since that afternoon tea with Lupin, she had steadily grown into her own. Suddenly, she was laughing heartily and was beginning to morph into a person with an identity, though she had yet to remember what it was before. It was easy to forget that she knew nothing of herself.

"Thanks," Harry said, shrugging sheepishly.

"I try," she said dramatically.

"Sarcastic, are we?" Harry asked. "This is from Ron, isn't it?" Jade raised an eyebrow and smiled.

"Great teacher, that Ron," she replied. Harry rolled his eyes. She crossed her arms in a fashion resembling that of Hermione's.

"Speaking of which," she continued, "your favorite professor is having an end of term exam in an hour."

"I can't survive a Snape final," Harry whined flipping through the book absentmindedly.

"Come on," Jade said excitedly, motioning her hand towards the hall. "We can drop off your book and catch a few minutes of cram session with Ron and Hermione before class."

"I knew you were one of Snape's minions," Harry returned. "Flitting about, sending student sacrifices to him."

"Me?" Jade said. "Never. Now come on, we've got to make sure you're going to fit in Snape's cauldron." Harry smirked.

"Okay, fine," he replied, "I can't imagine a better way to end an absolutely hostile day of exams than with—"

\* \* \*

Snape weaved his way between the tables, watching his students pour over exam packets and cauldrons. Harry watched him from his seat near the back of the class, and several times, he noticed that the Potions Master stared at Jade with something like...consternation? Sympathy? *Sympathy*.

"Five minutes remaining," Snape uttered in an oily undertone, moving towards the front of the class. Jade added a bit of crushed snakeskin and her potion boiled to a beautiful blue color. Its shade showed meticulous work.

Harry felt like drowning himself in the currently clear potion he brewed. He strained to remember the correct amounts needed to finish the Blindness Potion, feeling as if his brain had gone on winter holiday a day too early. Finally winging it, he drop in the snake skin and breathed a sigh of relief as it turned cerulean blue. Not quite the bright shade of Hermione's or Jade's, he thought, glancing up at the table in front of him where the girls were. He glanced at Ron beside him who looked as if he were about to faint before seeing a color similar to Harry's appear in his own cauldron. Blue enough, Harry mused, allowing lameness to seep over his now over-racked brain.

"Time," Snape said flatly and watched as Neville attempted to slip in several other ingredients. A fine line of sweat was visible on Neville's quivering brow even in the chill of the dungeons.

"I said 'Time' Longbottom," Snape barked sharply. Neville stopped and swallowed hard. He managed a small nod. The bell rang and a rush of relief passed over both Gryffindors and Slytherins.

"Thanks for the exam," Draco Malfoy called cheerily as he walked past Snape, flanked on either side by Crabbe and Goyle. When he passed Ron and Harry's table, his elbows jutted out and slyly pushed Crabbe into Ron who tumbled into his cauldron. The blue liquid splashed all over his red hair and freckled face and he sputtered, wiping some of it from his lips.

"Watch it!" Harry yelled angrily, pushing Crabbe away.

"What's going on?" Snape called crossing the classroom. Malfoy elbowed Goyle who was stifling a laugh.

“Nothing, sir,” Malfoy said sincerely. “Crabbe here tripped over Potter’s feet and fell into Weasley.” Ron who was running an arm across his eyes suddenly stopped sputtering.

“Ohmigod,” he muttered, rubbing his eyes harder.

“Ron, what’s wrong?” Hermione asked as she, Jade, Seamus, Dean, and several Slytherins gathered around the lanky framed boy. Ron stepped backwards and stumbled, steadied by Harry who threw out an arm to catch his friend.

“What is it?” Harry asked concerned.

“I...I can’t see!” Ron practically yelled with panic rising in his throat. His eyes were wide open, but it was obvious they were sightless.

“Well,” Malfoy said. “That is a blindness potion.”

“Shut up!” Hermione and Jade said in unison.

“Calm down,” Snape said plainly. There was no amusement in his voice—or sympathy. “You just got some of your blindness potion in your eyes Weasley, don’t be such a baby.” He took a step towards his office, before casting a sour glance down at Ron’s potion, adding rather coldly, “by the look of it, its too weak to cause any harm.” At that Malfoy burst into laughter.

“Mr. Malfoy,” Snape hissed rather irritably, a tone he rarely took with his favorite student, “classes are done for the term, why don’t you leave now?”

“Sure Professor,” Malfoy replied hesitantly, leading Crabbe and Goyle out (the two trolls were still ‘giggling’). “It was just an accident.” Harry helped Ron to a stool as Hermione tried to calm him.

“Its okay Ron,” Seamus offered. “Professor Snape’s got a solution for it...right professor?” Snape didn’t answer, but made his way to his office.

“He went to get something to fix it,” Hermione said taking Ron’s hand. He was shaking from panic.

“Come on mate,” Dean said cheerily, “Snape’ll fix it up.”

“Shut up, Dean!” Ron exploded catching him off guard. Hermione looked shock and despite Ron’s obvious discomfort, punched him in the arm.

“Ow!”

“You needn’t be rude,” she rasped at him and he scowled. Clearing her throat, she turned to Dean and flashed a smile. “The shock, you know Dean, its just getting to him now.” Dean nodded and patted Ron on the back, who would have flinched were his hand not being currently crushed by Hermione.

“Snape went to get a solution, Ron,” Harry said thickly, fighting off a laugh. He turned his head to look for Snape and found that Jade was kneeling in front of Ron.

“Don’t worry, all right?” she said. Ron swallowed and nodded.

“Everyone who is not helping Mr. Weasley may leave,” Snape announced harshly sending the remaining students out of the room. “That includes you, Jade.” He added rather severely. He seemed to hate to call her by her first name, as her last was not known.

Jade turned and met the professor’s eyes. Within seconds, Snape turned away from her. He shivered visibly as he faced Harry, Ron, and Hermione, and pressed no further for Jade to leave.

“Get Weasley to the infirmary,” Severus said, ignoring Jade and allowing his weariness to soften his harsh, quiet tone. “Tell Madam Pomfrey that his eyes need to be soaked with this blindness solution for twenty minutes. After that Weasley, your vision will be blurry for a few hours, but you’ll be fine.” Ron nodded and allowed Harry and Hermione to help him to his feet. Jade took the vial from Snape who seemed reluctant to give it to her. She led the way out, Ron stumbling between Harry and Hermione who were both shorter than he. In the dark underground halls, the torches gave an eerie glow to their faces. Suddenly Jade stopped and turned. A strange look fixed itself on her face. Harry shivered—in the dim light, her eye sockets looked empty.

“Stop,” Jade said firmly.

“What?” Ron asked. “What’s going on?”

“What is it?” Hermione asked. “Come on, we should get him to the Infirmary.” Jade motioned for them to be quiet. Before they could stop her, she popped the cork on the vial and poured the liquid into her hand.

“Jade!” Harry exclaimed, jumping wildly forward, tripping himself on Ron’s foot.

“Shhhh...” Jade voiced watching the liquid run from her finger. Words began to pour from her. “Nye...” Jade said fixating her eyes upon Ron’s sightless ones. “Nye mirare...”

Suddenly, the solution that dripped to the ground began to coagulate and formed a puddle like mercury in her cupped hand. “Nye mirare et diem.” She then walked up to Ron, one hand wrapped around the lucent green pendent around her neck, the other splayed their fingers as the liquid simmered away. “Nye mirare,” she said gently sliding her cool fingers over Ron’s eyes to close them, “et diem.” Harry and Hermione gawked at her as Ron raised an eyebrow curiously, eyes still closed.

“What was all that about?” he demanded curiously.

“Er...” Jade stuttered. She looked as startled as Harry and Hermione. “It was what you wanted—” she said hesitantly, “your sight back—wasn’t it?” Ron’s brows furrowed but instead of adding anything, he slowly opened his eyes. Hermione and Harry stared at him expectantly. “Brilliant!” Ron exclaimed, grinning from ear to ear. “I’d only want to be blind if I were stuck in a room with Malfoy!”

“How...what....but...” Hermione stuttered. She waved a hand in front of Ron’s eyes and he slapped it away, grinning. Harry (with effort) reunited his bottom jaw to his face.

“Do you know how utterly amazing that was?” he asked Jade quietly.

“What?” she replied, pressing a hand to her forehead. “That old spell?”

“Do you think you remembered that?” Hermione said, regaining her composure. “From your past? But it seems so advanced...I wonder if Madam Pomfrey could have done it.” Ron was busy doing a silly dance around them.

“Fantastic!” he said happily. “Jade, you’re the best! I don’t care how you did it, it was marvelous and now I don’t have to wait five hours to see clearly!”

“I still think we should go up to see Madam Pomfrey,” Hermione noted. “Just to be sure you’re all right...wouldn’t want you walking into a wall or anything.”

“I need to tell the Headmaster,” Jade murmured. “I think you’re right, Hermione. This just may be something I know...from my past.” Slowly, a smile appeared on her face as Harry continued to stare thoughtfully from her to the empty vial in her hand.

“Come on then, hospital wing first, then Dumbledore’s,” he finally managed, before leading the way out of the gloom, unsure of what exactly he was suppose to be feeling about what had just happened.

In the Hospital Wing, Pomfrey cleared Ron, but only after she had looked up the Mirare charm Jade had used. It was nearly half past the hour before she admitted that though the spell was not that complicated, it was old, and little known. Dumbledore had conveniently stopped by the infirmary and upon hearing Jade’s news, seemed rather bemused. Though he said little and merely nodded in a perplexed sort of way, it seemed that the information was running through his intricate mind readily.

“It’s another clue, Jade,” Dumbledore said nodding, looking at Ron. “I believe it is through the support of your friends that you are coming along so quickly.” Jade grinned at Harry, Hermione, and Ron.

“Ron?” Dumbledore said, suddenly reaching into his pocket. “May I have a quick word?”

“Yeah, okay,” Ron replied inquisitively. He and Dumbledore stepped a bit apart from the others. They discussed something quietly and the Headmaster handed Ron a sealed letter.

"Well now, I must be off," Dumbledore announced as he and Ron rejoined the group. "Now that exams are over, I must encourage you four to be ridiculously idle." With that he departed, Jade sniggering quietly.

"What's that?" Harry asked, pointing to the letter in Ron's hand.

"It's for my dad," Ron replied. "Dumbledore says it's just an affirmation about some news of his. He said he'd send it himself, but the Ministry's keeping tabs on all his post."

"He was serious about all the surveillance," Hermione murmured.

"Come on, then," Jade said. "We can go up the owlery before we take up Dumbledore's advice."

\* \* \*

At dinner that evening, they walked through towards the Great Hall, the telltale signs of Christmas evident on nearly every surface. There were no Christmas trees yet, but fairy lights with real fairies hung from the walls and beautiful ornate wreaths adorned the gothic arches.

"I wonder what Dumbledore's surprise will be," Hermione said as they entered the Great Hall. Ron raised an eyebrow.

"What?" he asked confused.

"The surprised he said he had for us," Jade answered, "to make up for the canceled Hogsmeade visits, not that I could go anyway."

"I forgot about that," Harry admitted shrugging. "Well, whatever it is, I'm sure it'll be great." They took seats next to Neville and the Weasley twins. Fred was busy creating plays out of breadsticks with Angelina. George was pretending to be sick in his soup bowl when they seated themselves next to him.

"Hi there, mates," he welcomed, fishing his head from the bowl. As they took their seats, McGonagall called for their attention. Dumbledore thanked her and stood.

"Congratulations on your survival till recent," he said good-heartedly. "Now that the first term is put behind you, I hope you all enjoy your winter holiday, whether you are staying here at Hogwarts or returning home." A cheer answered him from all the tables. He paused and smiled, looking as if that was all he had to say about school, but after McGonagall cleared her throat loudly beside him, he sheepishly added, "but let's not forget that some of you will take O.W.Ls and N.E.W.Ts before the year is out." A groan rippled through the older student (Ron's was particularly loud).

"As promised I will announce tonight what the staff has put together for students third year and up as a sort of consolation for the cancelled Hogsmeade trips."

"Cancel exams, cancel exams, cancel exams..." Ron chanted.

"There will be a promenade ball," Dumbledore announced, "set for the end of May, shortly after O.W.L and N.E.W.T exams."

The Hall grew thoughtfully quiet before filling with excited whispers. Fred seemed to mull over the announcement for a few seconds, before brightening.

"Wicked," he said with a grin, throwing a bread stick at Angelina. "Wanna rip up the dance floor with me?"

"Bet we can get a more causalities under our belt this time around," she replied, winking. Meanwhile, a very gray color had blanketed Ron's face.

"A what?" he mumbled glancing at Harry whose own face had fallen.

"A Promenade ball," Jade muttered happily. "I hope it looks like a quaffle."

"Maybe we're misinterpreting it," Harry replied, oblivious to Jade's comment. "It doesn't sound like a dance." Dumbledore smiled at the roll of excited chatter (and in Ron and Harry's case, frightful silence), and began to describe the surprise.

"A Promenade is a spring formal," he explained. "A ball held by muggles representing spring youth."

"Bugger," muttered a stolid Ron.

"Sorry little git," George said grinning. "That's the shocker. We're having a ball to make up for the canceled Hogsmeade trips. Who shall be my partner of doom?"

Harry eyed Ron and gulped. Maybe the ball would be canceled...Hogsmeade was...why not a *ball*? Of all the hideous torture...

"Now this one will be held accordingly with formal suits provided for the boys supplied by several tailors from Hogsmeade and Beacon square. Several dress shops from these two prestigious communities will also create gowns for the girls. Your measurements will be taken in April and all of it is completely complimentary!"

"I've got some brand new dance moves for this year," Fred was saying to Angelina, flashing a grin. "You ever hear of the Druid Drowner? It's practically a crime..."

"What one moment," Jade squeaked. "Dance? As in the Devil's Pleasure?"

"You really should stop reading those Calvinist history books," Hermione said to Jade reassuringly. "A ball is fun—the Yule Ball last year was fantastic, remember? The one I told you about?" Ron and Harry broke into coughing fits.

"Did you overload on cheering charms?" Ron gasped. "It was rancid!"

"I'm going to pretend you didn't say anything," Hermione said savagely. "It was a good time."

"Says you," Ron muttered. Harry groaned—he was not looking forward to the prospect of obtaining a date (the trials of last years attempt still haunted him; up till recent, Parvati's foot still occasionally spasmed right into his shins whenever he walked by). He looked up at Ron and Hermione who were staring daggers at each other.

Balls should be outlawed.

\* \* \*

Through dinner, Jade, Hermione, Ron, and Harry struggled to avoid the dreaded "B-word" (or anything sounding like dance, or formal, or promenade, or partners...), which in itself was a horrendously difficult task, considering most of their peers were chatting excitedly about it. Ginny had moved herself away from Neville who was explaining to Seamus that he was a much better dancer now...he had only stepped on his cousin foot twelve times at her wedding last summer.

At last, dinner ended and Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Jade made their way out of the hall and up the stairs, where Cho Chang bumped into them.

"Hi," she said cheerily (Harry's face went pink). She smiled at Jade and stuck out her hand. "I don't think we've met properly, I'm Cho." Jade smiled back giving her hand a friendly shake.

"Jade," she replied. "Nice to meet you."

"So are any of you staying for winter break?" Cho asked, walking beside Hermione.

"Er...yes," Harry said, attempting to control the tambour of his voice. Hermione came to rescue him.

"Yes, all of us are staying," she answered. "What about you?"

"I wanted to," Cho replied, "but I promised my parents I'd be home for Christmas this year."

"Oy, Cho!" called a girl several feet ahead of them. Cho grinned and waved to her.

"Coming, Julie!" she called back. Turning to Harry, she punched him lightly in the arm.

"By the way," she added, "you were great in last week's game. I saw that catch." Harry thought that he was about to cough up his heart.

“Right—so were you, I mean,” he managed. He quickly stopped and mentally kicked himself. Clearing his throat he stated firmly, “I meant, in your match against Hufflepuff. Can’t wait for our game together—I mean, against each other.”

“Me neither,” Cho replied, winking. “I’ll see you guys later, nice meeting you Jade. Wish us luck for our match against the Slytherins, okay?”

Harry grinned crookedly and waved to her as she ran towards her friend.

“Good luck!” Ron called and Cho smiled her gratitude. He then let out a chuckle and his face went crimson with the effort to suppress it as Harry fought with his tongue, trying in vain to force it to work.

“What are you laughing at?” Harry blurted out.

“Nothing,” Ron replied fighting another chortle. “I was just shocked as to how obvious you were—”

“You fancying Cho,” Ron blurted out, not bothering to lower his voice as they past a group of second years. The blood rushed to Harry’s face. It was no secret between he, Ron, and Hermione—they had known intuitively (or at least, picked up on Harry’s “subtle” behavior). If only he could have summoned his broom as fast as his face was reddening, he’d smack Ron with it. Repeatedly.

“Is it that obvious?” Harry forced himself to ask evenly.

“Ron noticed,” Hermione replied matter-of-factly. “It’s that obvious.”

“I resent that,” Ron managed to choke out despite the fact he was laughing.

“Oh shut up,” Harry muttered. “We can’t all sweep girls off their feet like you can—Fleur for example.” Ron’s ears instantly fired up red.

“You like Cho?” Jade asked Harry as Ron laughter died. “Like love-like, not like-like.”

“What?” Ron and Harry asked together, confused.

“He does like Cho,” Hermione explained, but after catching the glower now burning beneath the embarrassment on Harry’s face she added, “but I think he’d like to keep it quiet.”

“Oh.”

“I must comment though,” Hermione said with a small smile. “I think she thought you were a real smooth operator, Harry.”

## 11. A Ministry Hero

Christmas was just a few days away and Harry was busy transporting the presents he had ordered from the *Waggol's World of Wizardry Whims* catalog he had received months ago. They had sent a letter announcing that the Overnight Express Owls used would need a place to simply drop the packages and go. So Harry prearranged the stop to be a high balcony on the north tower where they usually had Astronomy during term.

It was nearing eleven and Harry was making his way back to Gryffindor tower, after succeeding in being beaned in the head by packages falling from the grips of several passing owls (it would be the last time Harry considered using Waggol's again). He was making his way awkwardly and alone through a darkened hallway when the faint sounds of a heated conversation came to his ears. As they grew more audible, Harry recognized Dumont's airy tone and Snape's low, oily one. He felt panic build in his throat—so far, he had made it through the first term without a detention, but being caught by Snape wandering the halls in the middle of the night would assure that record would be blasted to smithereens.

As the steps of the approaching pair resounded louder and louder, Harry quickly turned to a door to his left. It was locked. The next door opened into a broom closet that smelt remarkably of dragon dung. Wrinkling his nose, he decided to let that hiding place be a last resort and proceed to the next door. The knob turned and Harry flung himself into the empty classroom it revealed, spilling his packages onto the floor.

Just as he shut the door, Snape and Dumont entered the hall, stopping inches from the very room Harry was in. Feeling his heart slowly return to a normal, functional pace, Harry knelt down and pressed his eye to the keyhole, making out the side of Snape's rigid body and part of Dumont's rather furious face.

"You said it yourself," Dumont was saying pointing a finger at a book she was holding in the crook of her arm. "You know the possibilities.... isn't that a risk in itself?"

"It was destroyed by Dumbledore himself," Snape hissed in return.

"This will draw You-Know-Who here," Dumont continued coldly. "Are you absolutely certain Dumbledore is telling the truth?"

"You listen here," Snape's voice was now white-hot and he turned on her like predator to prey. "I trusted Dumbledore even before I could trust myself—don't ever let me hear you question his authority and actions again. Just because you're a scholar of books doesn't mean you're a master of action and wisdom." Dumont blinked silently at him, her hands shaking at her side.

"The lives of the innocent are at stake," she persisted quietly. "Harry Potter already draws Him near, don't you think one bread crumb to this safe haven is enough? You know... *you've* seen it. Dumbledore knows, and yet you both have bitten off more than you two can chew. I only hope that at least one of you won't choke."

"You know I don't like this whole idea—but you haven't heard a word I've said, have you?" Snape asked in steely tone. "It doesn't exist—and if it did, can't you see that Dumbledore understands that Voldemort can't change it if it continues to be what it is? How can the Guardian exist if it is no longer in guarding?"

"That's Russian Roulette he's playing then, Severus," Dumont replied. Snape drew himself to his full, and considerable height, turning away from her sharply so that the billowy clouds of his cloak swished around him.

"We are hardly on casual terms," he stated simply in a dangerous sort of way, "that's Professor Snape to you."

He turned and smoothly slid away, leaving the young woman alone and bewildered. It took a few minutes before Dumont even blinked. She let out a soft cry, and to Harry's surprise, choked down a sob, violently wringing her hands. It was no more than a second before she had collected her self and left.

Letting out a breath of air, Harry stood up and brushed the dust from the knees of his jeans. A sound from the darkened office in the corner of classroom startled him.

"Harry?" A voiced called out, it's owner slowly coming into view. The light of the quarter moon caught his face.

"Professor Lupin," Harry blurted out, startled. "You scared me."

"Sorry about that," Lupin replied, stepping towards him. "I don't usually have people crouched in my classroom in the middle of the night."

"I just, er...." Harry attempted to explain motioning towards the packages on the ground. "I was retrieving my Christmas delivery." Lupin glanced at the boxes that littered the ground and grinned.

"Do you usually receive delivery's in my classroom?" he asked pulling out a chair and sitting. He reached over and pulled out a second chair, offering it to Harry. Harry obliged and tried to explain why he was out alone in the halls so late, loaded with packages and how he had ended up crouching behind Lupin's classroom door.

"So it really was just an accident," Harry explained. "I just was trying to escape Snape and Dumont and you're classroom was the only room open." Harry had failed to mention anything about his unplanned eavesdropping, though he hardly thought Lupin wasn't aware of it. His Defense professor flashed a small smile before letting his gaze fall on the closed door.

"I don't blame you, Harry," he said quietly. "Being caught by Snape—that's enough to make anyone duck and cover." Harry grinned self-consciously, and for the first time realized that the office from which Lupin had stepped from was as absent of light as the rest of the classroom.

"What were you doing just sitting in the dark?" Harry asked curiously. Lupin looked away, tapping the top of his knee as if it were a button to delete Harry's question.

"Just thinking," he finally mustered.

"Thinking about what?" Harry asked.

"A lot of things," Lupin supplied. "About my reasons for coming here, whether they were notions of selfishness or not."

"What are you talking about?" Harry demanded, staring at his professor in surprise. "Your coming is a blessing, and I know you came because Dumbledore asked you to. You came under a request—a duty."

Lupin's face was drawn and he looked inches from kindly insisting Harry to leave, but for some reason he held his tongue, and instead traced a circle over and over on the table.

"I dreamed of returning often for the past two years," Lupin said quietly, "even knowing the risk I placed on you kids. I may be part of Dumbledore's army, but I have wanted...even needed to be involved, though I know every few weeks I become only another menace for everyone concerned." Harry shook his head firmly.

"The Headmaster has his reasons," Harry insisted mirroring Snape's own surprising convictions. "I can't believe you would even question his judgment." He paused and added, "Besides, Professor Snape can't be the Defense teacher if you are." Lupin laughed sadly, shaking his head.

"Don't let him catch you saying that," he replied through a weak smile. They sat in silence, but Harry felt that he wasn't to leave just yet.

"Did you hear anything?" Lupin finally asked. "I mean between Professors Dumont and Snape." Harry didn't respond immediately, trying to collect the words exchanged between the two professors.

“A little,” he finally admitted. “Not enough to make any sense anyway.” Lupin nodded, glancing at his watch.

“It’s getting late,” he said getting up from his chair. “You better leave, but be careful of Filch.” He winked, and added, “he’s been doing double rounds lately.”

Lupin helped Harry pick up the spilt packages and led him to the door.

“By the way,” he said. “If you happen to ever understand more then you reveal, just trust yourself to make proper judgment.” Harry nodded at the ambiguous statement. He turned as if he aimed to leave, but quickly turned around.

“Professor Lupin?” Harry said.

“Yes?”

“Why did Sirius warn me about Jade?”

Lupin remained silent and Harry waited stubbornly for the answer.

“For whatever the reason,” he finally replied. “It is one derived from his inability to be here to protect you personally.” He smiled at Harry’s rather unsatisfied look. “Basically for the same worries the Ministry has about her: they simply know too little.”

“Its ridiculous,” Harry muttered as Lupin opened the door for him and Lupin agreed.

“Well, anyway,” he added as Harry entered the hall. “Thanks for stopping by.”

“Thank you,” Harry returned grinning. “For deciding to come back.” Lupin smiled appreciatively and Harry departed towards Gryffindor Tower, expertly skirting areas heavily patrolled by Mrs. Norris.

\* \* \*

“Hupplewhirl,” Harry said as he approached the portrait hole. He shifted the jumble of packages in his arms as the Fat Lady glanced down at him.

“Precisely,” she replied, before spying quickly around him adding in a hushed tone, “you don’t have that queer girl with you, do you?” Harry shook his head, now increasingly impatient.

“Can you let me in?” he asked, rolling his eyes and shifting the weight of the packages in his arms.

“All right, don’t have to get all smart,” she muttered, swinging the portrait open. He entered quietly seeing that Hermione and Ron were completely immersed in a game of chess at the far end of the room, their backs facing him. Hermione had invited Jade to share her dormitory with her, having it completely to herself, but Jade had politely refused, insisting she was rather tired. So that left Hermione with a choice of either studying or a game of “insta-death” Wizard’s chess with Ron. Surprisingly, Ron had successfully conned her into the game of chess.

Harry quickly went upstairs and stashed the gifts, before returning to the common room. He pulled up a chair and joined Hermione and Ron, who didn’t seem to notice he now sat between them. He cleared his throat.

“Shhh!” Hermione snapped. “I’m trying to concentrate.” Harry looked rather taken aback.

“Sorry,” Harry muttered under his breath. Ron nodded without peeling his eyes from his game pieces as he directed one of his bishops forward and watched with a stolid face as it pounded Hermione’s knight and dragged it off the board.

“Forgiven,” he breathed as he awaited Hermione’s move. “You’re going to have to concentrate a little harder, Hermione.” She huffed and Harry feared her eyes would burn a hole through the board.

“Who’s winning?” he asked.

“That’s hardly a valid question in chess,” Hermione replied shortly, before looking up defiantly at Ron. “Concentrate this!” She had directed her own bishop forward and it dragged off Ron’s rook, putting his king in check.

“Are you two even going to listen to me?” Harry continued, struggling for their attention.

“Yeah,” Ron muttered, addressing his king to move.

“I have to tell you two something,” Harry continued to press. “It’s important.”

“One minute,” Hermione replied, obviously not listening to a word. Her eyes narrowed at the board as she commanded her knight forward.

“Not so brilliant, Hermione,” Ron replied, watching as his knight-hammered her’s to the board and dragged it off.

“Hello?” Harry demanded. “I’ve got to TELL you both something!”

“What was that?” Hermione asked emotionlessly, before grinning maliciously. “Check again!” Ron’s brows knitted and he leaned forward, moving his rook down the board.

“Checkmate.”

“It’s about Snape—” Harry broke in loudly.

“But I was winning!” Hermione exclaimed, rather flabbergasted.

“I’VE KILLED SOMEONE!” Harry finally exploded before Ron could reply. Hermione’s jaw dropped and she turned to face him.

“Harry,” Hermione gasped. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“Who’d you kill?” Ron asked curiously. Harry groaned and pulled his chair in closer, checking the common room for any stray wanderers.

“I overheard Dumont and Snape arguing,” he said, “something about stopping Voldemort from getting something...I think she called it ‘the Guardian’. The thing is, it doesn’t exist—or at least they’re not sure it does.” Ron grimaced for a moment, the color washed from his face. Hermione shuddered at Harry’s mention of the Name.

“Voldemort—” Ron hissed trying in vain to halt the quivers that raked his body. Harry was about to apologize but decided against it.

“Dumont sounded as if she thought whatever Dumbledore was choosing to do with this ‘Guardian’ was going to endanger Hogwarts,” Harry pressed on, “as well as allow Voldemort a path to power again.” He glanced away as Ron and Hermione flinched again. “Snape seemed like he was going to follow Dumbledore, but truthfully, I don’t think he’s totally confident in the Headmaster’s decision. On top of that they were saying loads of stuff that just didn’t make any sense. Dumont was seemed pretty upset about it.” Hermione swallowed.

“Maybe that’s their mission...I mean with Snape and Hagrid being gone all the time, they’re obviously on call by Dumbledore,” she said softly. “Sirius too even, if he’s so preoccupied all the time. I wonder what this ‘guardian’ is—and why Dumont’s so interested in it.”

“Me too,” Harry agreed. He explained his close shave, being nearly discovered wandering about by Snape and Dumont and how he had ended up talking with Lupin.

“He really thinks that he puts us in danger because he’s being selfish?” Ron said bewildered. “He’s ruddy insane.” Harry nodded and picked up a fallen chess piece from the floor.

“I tried to tell him,” he said.

“Did Professor Lupin know you were eavesdropping?” Hermione asked tightly.

“Crikey, Hermione,” Ron said. “You make it sound like a capitol crime.” Despite himself, Harry grinned.

“I didn’t tell him I overheard the conversation between Dumont and Snape,” he went on to explain, “but as I was leaving he said something that makes me believe he knew but wasn’t going to force a confession out of me.”

“What did he say?” Hermione asked curiously.

“If you happen to ever understand more then you reveal, just trust yourself to make proper judgment.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Ron murmured.

“Go with your instinct,” Hermione interpreted. “Lupin advised Harry to go with his gut if he knew what was going on.”

“And it had something to do with Dumont and Snape’s argument.”

“It almost sounds as if he knows you’re going to have to decide about something,” Ron muttered more to himself than Hermione or Harry. Harry didn’t say anything, but Ron’s conjecture unsettled him slightly. The last time he made an important decision, an innocent 17 year old boy died.

“Well,” Hermione finally said, “all these presumptions are getting us nowhere quickly.” Harry quickly agreed with her. Ron fingered a hole in the wrist of his sweater.

“I suppose you should follow Lupin’s advice,” he said. “He did say ‘If you understand’, Harry, and that’s just it...you don’t.”

\* \* \*

The beginning of the Holidays found the Great Hall peacefully quiet in its nearly empty state. In the early morning hours, Jade enjoyed having the hall to herself and ate her porridge slowly as a tawny owl dropped a rolled newspaper in her lap. She picked up the paper, which apparently was Hermione’s subscription and was about to drop it uninterestedly into the chair next to her’s when the front page caught her eye. Jade stood up excitedly as she finished reading the article. She pushed her chair back and left the hall before tearing excitedly up the stairs towards Gryffindor Tower, the copy of the *Daily Prophet* folded hastily in her hand. She rounded a corner and collided with a red-haired girl, who gave a squeal as they both fell to the ground.

“Ginny!” Jade exclaimed surprised, getting up and pulling the younger girl to her feet.

“Someone’s in a hurry this morning,” Ginny replied rubbing her bum. “Where’s the fire?”

“Pardon?”

“Never mind, what’s up?”

“Nothing,” Jade apologized, “Well, not *exactly* nothing...more like *something*. Your father, he’s a—well, just read this!” She unfurled the paper, revealing the front page that featured a large picture of Arthur Weasley observing several Ministry agents leading three bound and cloaked figures out of a large castle-like manor. Mr. Weasley seemed to be calling out directions as he moved to and fro, waving a hand at the agents while their cloaked prisoners looked sourly out at Ginny. The headline that stretched across the unfolded page read: Ministry Worker Prevents More Murders by Death Eaters!

“Dad!” Ginny exclaimed shocked. She took the paper and began to read excitedly. “Arthur Weasley of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office received a call yesterday when several Muggles witnessed highly valuable pieces of china and crystal flying about before crashing to the ground. The pieces belong to the Mayfields, a prominent wizarding family whom reside in a well-hidden manor near an undisclosed, muggle-populated village.

'He quickly assembled several men together and was the first to arrive on the scene. What he stumbled upon was not just flying china, but also three cloaked and masked men apparently having a good time with the valuable porcelain. He snuck up on the men and stealthily put them out with a well-aimed stunning charm. Weasley's men arrived several minutes later, but as they entered the house, other alleged suspects of the crime fled from them and disappeared. The Mayfields were found huddled inside, unharmed but bound, along with Alexor Rudolf, brother of Mrs. Branford Mayfield. Alexor Rudolf was an acussed Death Eater 14 years ago, but has since both served his time and had his name cleared. He was visiting his sister for the holidays when the unjust occurred. The suspects where dressed as Death Eaters, followers of You-Know-Who, and apparently were planning to carry out yet, another act of terror much like those that occurred over the summer and in past months, leaving nine people dead. Arthur Weasley may have prevented what would have been five more counts to the death toll.'

Ginny took a deep breath as a big grin spread across her face. She looked up at Jade whose eyes were twinkling with excitement.

"You haven't got to the best part!" she said urging Ginny on. Ginny scanned down to the last paragraph.

"Both the Ministry and the people of the Wizarding community have come to recognize Mr. Weasley as a hero, and he will be presented with a well deserved Honorary Actions award on the 30th of December."

"Good Morning," a friendly voice said. The two girls whipped their eyes from the paper to see Hermione yawning in front of them. "What are you two up to this early?"

"Hermione, look!" Ginny said, and as Jade explained the major details, Hermione read through the paper.

"That's fantastic!" she announced happily, holding it out to better glimpse the front page. "Not about the Death Eaters...that's horrible. If anyone deserves an award, its Mr. Weasley."

"I have to tell my brothers!" Ginny squealed, hurrying along the hall with Hermione and Jade in tow. "Fred and George are simply going to drop dead!"

They entered the Gryffindor common room to find Harry and Ron making their way down from the boy's dormitories. The girls shared their news and the *Daily Prophet* was passed around.

"I can't believe it!" Ron exclaimed with a mix of joy and resentment in his voice. "Of course the Ministry would want to award my dad. He's the only one doing anything productive!"

"It's about time your dad got some recognition," Harry grinned, though he understood Ron's slight edge. He himself felt this recognition was a small consolation for what Mr. Weasley must be putting on the line. It occurred to him that Mrs. Weasley's promise to the Headmaster last year had held fast, and that Mr. Weasley was doing all he could to build an army to against Voldemort within the government. It was Mr. Weasley who kept Dumbledore so well informed about the Ministry after all, and quite possibly, also the "agent" the Headmaster had contacted for information about Jade's family...all at a risk to his reputation and job.

"Your dad's a hero," Jade said smiling.

"It's old news to me," Ron replied grinning. A tapping sound came from the nearest window, and Harry looked up to find a little fluttering, gray, puff. It kept bobbing in and out of sight; weighed down with a letter twice it's size.

"Ron, its Pigwideon," he said, pointing to the window. Ron handed Hermione her paper and went over to pry open the window. When he finally succeeded, a strong, subzero gust blew the tiny owl in, smacking Ron square in the face.

"Argh!" he yelled, pulling the squawking creature away from him. Crookshanks leapt from a nearby chair, fur on end by the racket. Hermione gave him a quick, soothing pat as she made to close the window from which a cold gust continued to blow.

"Thanks, Hermione," Ron said running a hand through his wind swept hair. "Hold still, Pig!" With the help of Harry, he finally was able to untie the letter from the little gray fluff ball.

"It's from Mum," Ron said, ripping open the envelope.

"Oh, let me see, Ron!" Ginny said, taking the empty envelope from her brother.

"I'll read it out loud," Ron responded, showing Ginny the letter, before he started reading from it.

"Dear Ginny, Ron, Fred, and George, I hope you are all behaving and keeping an eye on each other. I have yet to find the need to send any howlers—which, I suppose, should strike suspicion. I can never be sure with the twins still in school, now can I? Anyhow, I expect that every one of you has done well on your end of term exams. Right Ron? With Hermione to help you and all...I do hope that you aren't giving the poor girl any trouble." Ron paused and looked rather flabbergasted.

"I don't see her getting all smart with the twins or Ginny about their exams," Ron said rolling his eyes. Hermione gave him a trying look.

"Go on," Harry urged, taking the paper from Hermione so that he could glance through the article as Ron read on.

"Well, this letter, I think is a little more exciting than most of my letters to you all. If you haven't already heard, your father is being honored with an award on the thirtieth of December. Finally, the Ministry is giving him the kind of recognition he has deserved for ages. Your father and I want all of you to be there to finally see him be recognized as the hero that he is and has been since I've met him. I tried to get extra seats for Harry, Hermione, and Jade, but I'm sorry to say that the Ministry's formal hall is filled to capacity. Mostly with reporters and such...but I hear Rita Skeeter has turned this one down. Curious'." At that Hermione grinned smugly.

"I hope that both Harry and Hermione are both doing well. Will you ask him for me if he would prefer a blue or green sweater this year? I've already finished them, mind you, but a little color charm would do the trick. Perhaps Hermione would like one too?" Ron paused and grinned.

"I s'pose she's trying to make up for the minuscule Easter egg last year, eh, Hermione?" Ron asked.

"Don't remind me and just read on," she shot back. Ginny and Jade looked a bit confused. "I'll explain later," she added to them.

"I hope that everything's going fine for Harry. I reckon it must have been a tough year," Ron read on, glancing up apologetically at Harry. "But he's strong and resilient, and from what I heard so far, seems to be getting along just fine without the likes of my fussing. Professor Dumbledore has also spoke to your father and I about Jade's recent improvements and we're both thrilled that you all have been so kind to her. Well now look, I'm rambling on quite a bit. I suppose I'll end here. We'll join you all for breakfast on the morning of the 30th, and then we'll all spend the day in London together. Charlie, Bill, and Percy will be there also, so it'll be a nice family reunion for a change. I love you all. Love, Mum."

"What's with the racket?"

Fred and George had appeared from the stairs leading to the boy's dormitory. They were both still dressed in pajamas.

"Fred, George!" Ginny cried out excitedly. "You'll never guess what happened!"

\* \* \*

Harry went to bed Christmas Eve in high spirits. He, Ron, Hermione, and Jade had sat around talking to Fred, George, and Ginny all evening, and just before dinner, Hagrid had stopped by, hinting at yet another surprise Dumbledore and the staff had put together for the students remaining at Hogwarts for the Holidays.

Deep in sleep, Harry dreamt of Voldemort suffering from a bad bout of the flu caused by his own blood and Mr. Weasley throwing his plug collection at the scattering death eaters. But when Voldemort spoke, his raw voice came out strangely high and squeaky.

"Ow," Harry murmured as a few of Mr. Weasley's plugs flew astray and smacked him in the head.

"Sorry, Harry Potter, sir," the squeaky voice of a house elf answered. Harry awoke with a start. Sitting on his bed was Dobby, the house elf Harry had liberated several years back, poking him awake.

"Merry Christmas, Harry Potter, sir," the little elf said excitedly. "Dobby is sorry he woke you, sir."

"Dobby!" Harry hissed, though quickly smiled when he saw the crest-fallen face. "What is it, Dobby? This isn't becoming tradition is it?" The elf brightened and pulled himself taller in his maroon sweater and miss-matched socks.

"No sir, it is a pure accident sir, but Dobby is having to leave soon and wanting to give Harry Potter his Christmas gift, sir."

"This couldn't wait until morning?" Harry asked, rising up on his elbows. He reached over for his glasses.

"No, Harry Potter sir," Dobby said shaking his head so that his ears flopped slightly. "Dobby is leaving for a mission in a few minutes for the Headmaster Dumbledore, but I is wanting to give you your gift first."

"For Dumbledore?" Harry asked surprised. "Where are you going?"

"Sorry, Harry Potter, sir," Dobby said sternly, "but Dobby is to tell no one where I is going and that it involves the girl...." Suddenly a look similar to that of a deer caught in headlights came over his curious face. "OH, NO! Dobby is already not getting these directions right!" Harry's eyebrows furrowed in the darkness as he watched Dobby refrain from beating himself

"It's all right I didn't hear what you said," Harry insisted sitting up, curious now about what the house elf was up too, but understanding the little creature's determination to keep his word to the Headmaster. "Just keep it down, Ron's asleep."

"Yes, sir," Dobby replied, drastically decreasing his volume. "Dobby has brought a present for Harry Potter's Wheezy too." The elf handed two presents to Harry; one addressed to himself, the other to Ron. With urging from Dobby, he opened the package to find a pair of flannel boxers...emblazoned with snitches.

"Why—" Harry said thoroughly startled. After the initial shock, he grinned broadly and said, "Thanks, I love them."

"I is hoping to be spontaneous, Harry Potter," Dobby squeaked, unspeakably happy that Harry had liked his present. Harry climbed to the end of his bed and pulled from his trunk the sweater Mrs. Weasley had made for him last year. It had a dragon on the front, and though Harry loved it, he doubted that he would actually put it to as much use as Dobby surely would.

"Here Dobby, Merry Christmas," he said handing the sweater to the elf. He squealed with delight and burst into tears.

"Dobby is so happy, Harry Potter, sir!"

Harry had to plead with him to quiet down as Ron turned nosily in his sleep.

"You're very welcome," Harry said, then quickly added (hoping to catch the elf off guard), "Listen, why does your mission involve Jade?" Dobby's tennis-ball eyes grew wide.

"I is not saying, Harry Potter," he whispered.

"I'm curious Dobby, I won't tell anyone," Harry tried. Dobby looked very strained.

"I is going to speak to other house elves, sir," he said very quietly so that Harry had to lean in to hear. "To see if I can find news of the girl Jade's family, Harry Potter." Dobby looked positively ill now, and Harry felt awful prying as he watched the elf silently punish himself. Harry cleared his throat, pretending he was straining to hear the whimpering elf.

"What was that? I didn't catch it," Harry said slowly, shaking his head and shrugging. "Sorry, Dobby but its just too early to hear anything properly." Dobby's face brightened.

"I...I is just talking to my self, sir, nothing important, no sir," he stammered with obvious relief on his face. "But Dobby must go now, Harry Potter."

"Well then, have a good trip," Harry replied. "Visit me when you come back, all right—but in the day time, please."

"Yes Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby said exuberantly. "It would be Dobby's pleasure." With a snapping of his fingers, the house else disappeared.

Harry lay back and let his mind wander, making a mental note to share Dobby's excursions with Ron and Hermione in the morning, and before he knew it, he was asleep again dreaming of playing Quidditch with Cho, Ron, Hermione, and Jade joining them in the air.

\* \* \*

"Oy! Harry! Get up!" A pillow sailed through the partially open hangings and hit Harry in the back.

"I already got your gift, Dobby," Harry muttered incoherently.

"What?" Ron called once more as he reached down for the first package at the foot of his bed. "Come on, Princess, wake up."

Harry turned over, and put on his glasses, squinting in the morning light. He flung open the curtains completely and threw Ron's pillow back at him.

"Happy Christmas," Harry said grinning as he took a gander at his own pile of gifts.

"Same to you," Ron said before his voice caught in his throat. "You didn't!" Excitedly, he held up a Chudley Cannon quidditch sweater. "You're the best, thanks Harry." Ron pulled it on and went to examine himself in the mirror. "It's even got my name on the back! Well, start opening!" he turned and urged as Harry tossed him the gift from Dobby.

"Present from Dobby," Harry said as Ron raised an eyebrow. "I'm thinking he fancies you." Ron grinned and placed it aside as Harry ripped open his first package. It was another famous Weasley sweater, in deep navy blue this year, accompanied by a box of home made sweet meats. Underneath that he found a lumpy envelope from the Dursleys.

"Our scholastic contribution," Harry read on the card. He picked up the envelope and dumped out a tiny pencil nub. "How considerate," he grinned, thoroughly amused by their growing creativity. From Hagrid he received three beautifully tanned leather bookmarks with suede fringe, and from Hermione a book called *Famous Seekers of the Century*. Ron had given him a handy paperweight disguised perfectly as a golden snitch; it even floated several inches off his hand when a button under the wing was pushed. He unwrapped his last package, from Jade. It was a lovely hand-carved frame, holding the picture Colin had taken of all four of them before the Gryffindor match against Slytherin. Harry waved at himself from behind the glass.

"Wow, did you get a look at this?" Ron murmured impressed as he held up his own picture frame from Jade. "She even carved in a knight"—he paused long enough to bring it up to his nose—"but my hair's messed up in this picture." Harry grinned and examined his own frame and found that a wonderful Quidditch scene had been etched into the wood.

"Brilliant," Harry said as both he and Ron put their framed pictures on their bedside bureaus. Ron jumped off his bed to pick up Dobby's gift, which he had laid aside, and spilt a box of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans in the process. The beans scattered across the floor and under his bed. Ron groaned, putting down Dobby's package and bent to pick them up.

"Really gifted with grace, you are," Harry grinned. Ron scowled and threw a handful of beans at him.

"I hope those were all bogie flavored," Ron muttered. He bent down to scoop up the remaining beans as Harry kept himself amused by chucking several at his friend's head.

"I reckon this one's earwax," Harry said aiming it at Ron who was half under his bed, trying to retrieve the rest of the candy. "Oh, lucky you! This one looks like vomit—"

"Will you st—," Ron halted, his head under his bed. "Oh no..."

"What is it?" Harry asked curiously, getting off his own bed, dropping the remaining beans back into their box.

"Its Hermione's Christmas gift," Ron groaned, pulling himself out from under his bed, grasping a small box in his hand. "I must have missed it when I was putting them all out last night...I hope she didn't think I forgot about her."

"Well, come on then, she's probably in the common room," Harry said throwing on his new sweater and grabbing Dobby's gift to Ron. "You can open this down there." Ron, still looking incredibly guilty, took the package from Harry and tucked it along with his gift to Hermione under his arm. They made their way down the spiraling staircase and entered the common room, to find a blazing fire, which warmed the cheerily decorated room. Ginny, Hermione, and Jade had chosen seats around the hearth, each with their own Weasley sweater on over their nightdresses. Jade was chatting cheerily as she wrote down spells she remembered in a beautiful leather spell book Harry had given her, a hair comb from Ron precariously fixed in her hair.

"Happy Christmas and a merry Boxing day," she announced putting down her quill, spotting them as they made their way through the room.

"Happy Christmas," Harry replied sitting in an armchair next to the sofa Hermione and she were sharing. "You're a bit early with Boxing day, though."

"Thank you so much for the date book and quills, Harry," Hermione said smiling, though Harry didn't think it was his imagination that the look she cast Ron was a rather hurt one. "I love them."

Ron cleared his throat hesitantly.

"Listen Hermione—" he started but was cut off by her.

"No its all right," she cut him off curtly, avoiding his eyes. "You don't have to explain anything. I'm sure you had a good reason. Though a card would have more than sufficed." There was a slight edge to her words as she glanced at her own gift to him: a Chudley Cannon wool scarf, probably carefully picked out, wrapped around his neck. Ron gulped and looked at Harry for assistance, who shrugged back at him helplessly.

"But—" Ron attempted again.

"I said forget it, Ron," Hermione nearly snapped. Jade and Ginny looked uncomfortably at each other in the silence.

"I didn't forget you," Ron managed, his face so pale that his freckles stood out very clearly across his nose. "Just forgot to put out your gift last night." He thrust the small package at Hermione. I'm really sorry, it was just so small..." Jade gave him a quick sympathizing look as he sat down awkwardly next to her.

Hermione's face had turned a deep magenta and for a moment, it looked as if she were speechless.

"Heh..." she finally managed sheepishly. "Erm...I—."

"Forget it," Ron said shrugging, as the color finally returned to his face. Harry gave him a knowing glance. Hermione looked as if she wished she could sink into the floor and vanish.

"Well, go on," Ron urged a grin spreading on his face. "That's a present, it's not going to open it's self."

Hermione slowly opened it and found an antique compact mirror. She flipped it open and gazed at it dreamily.

"Thanks Ron," she said running a finger over the floral inlay; soft hues of rose and silver made up the glossy surface.

"Yeah well," Ron said, as his ears turned pink. "Just to let you know, that...er...I remember you're a girl and all...but not that I'm playing at anything...like getting your answers for a potions assignment..." Ron stopped himself and poked at the wrapped gift Dobby had given him. Hermione, who was now thoroughly embarrassed, seemed incapable of looking up at any of them. Finally, she got up, laid aside her dignity, and quickly gave Ron a hug.

"It's just a mirror," Ron grumbled slightly, a look somewhere near that of horror on his face as she pulled away.

A tapping sounded from the window and Harry looked up to see a snowy owl accompanied by one of the school's tawnies. He got up and flung open the pane, feeling the crisp winter air sweep down on him as the two owls fluttered in.

"I've missed you," Harry said warmly as Hedwig landed on his out-stretched forearm. Hedwig hooted softly and rubbed her head under his chin. Harry laughed, untied the small bundle of letters and thanked her. She fluttered over to an armchair where she began to fix her windswept feathers. The other owl hooted, calling for Harry's attention, waiting impatiently for him to remove its burden. When he finished, the barn owl snapped its beak wearily took flight towards the open window.

"What are all these?" Harry asked curiously, walking over to the others. There was one addressed to everyone in Gryffindor Tower who remained for the holidays. He handed them out, as Fred and George appeared each wearing a new sweater, examining their mother's handy work.

"I think she's trying to cut down on yarn," Fred was saying. "I can almost see through yours."

"Maybe she feels sorry for all those sheep," George replied. "Reckon they must be cold without their wool. Happy Christmas! How goes it?" He plopped down on the arm of Ginny's chair.

"Here," Harry said handing them their letters too. They opened them and found they each had an identical notice.

*Dear Students,*

*In light of the holiday spirit, the staff and I have arranged a special surprise. The Christmas feast will not be held in the Great Hall this year, because I feel there is another place that can offer a far more spirited atmosphere. Please meet at the lake at half past one. A Very Merry Christmas to you all.*

*Yours,*

*Professor Dumbledore and Staff*

"That surprise Hagrid was talking about!" Ginny said happily re-reading her letter.

"Why the lake though?" George said curiously. "It's bloody freezing outside!"

"Ah," Fred murmured thoughtfully. "Nothing says 'merriment' like 'frost bite'."

They talked excitedly before returning to their dorms to shower and change, and though Harry was filled with happiness and excitement, he couldn't completely hide his disappointment that there was not so much as a letter from Sirius. He logically told himself that Sirius was very busy and that Christmas was just beginning, and possibly a letter would arrive before the day was out. Ron reassured him that Sirius still free and safe because the papers would be all over it otherwise and Snape had not been away since his return two months before.

This all on top of his father's capture of several possible Death Eaters; a sure sign that any Voldemort attack was now in relative check—or at least under more attention by the Ministry.

At a quarter after one, Fred, George, Ginny, Jade, Ron, Hermione, and Harry clambered out of the portrait hole and began to make their way out of the castle. They left through the massive front doors, accompanied by a small handful of other students. Two were Hufflepuff second years, and three were Ravenclaws, including Mandy Brocklehurst.

“My parents had a last minute business engagement,” she explained to them as they all waddled through the snow, pulling scarves tightly around their necks and cloaks closer to their bodies. “I had to insist over and over again that I’d love to spend the holidays at Hogwarts.” At that, she cast Ron a *very* friendly look that made Hermione scoff. The lake slowly swam into view as they passed Hagrid’s hut.

“Look,” Harry murmured. They hurried forward and found a delightful sight. The lake was frozen over and incased in an enchanted glass dome that reflected what seemed to be the aurora borealis. It was decorated with ornate wreaths and tinsel covered Christmas trees. There were enchanted ice sculptures, wonderfully charming snowmen, and warm bonfires that thawed the hands and faces of the staff gathered around them, but not the snow and ice that they were built upon. Inside, they could see Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall, and Hagrid skating jovially around a carpeted area where a table was set festively and warmed by torches. All in all, it looked like a very merry Christmas snow globe, complete with falling snow, which landed dry and warm.

“How do we get in?” Jade asked, reaching up and gingerly touching the surface of the glass dome. The answer seemed clear as her hand passed straight through the shell. Grinning, she stepped through and turned, urging them to follow her lead. Hermione followed suit first and the rest glided through the glass like Hogwarts’ ghost through walls.

“Happy Christmas!” Dumbledore called warmly skating up to them. The students stood on the snow at the edge of the lake, suddenly very warm and comfortable.

“And the same to you, Headmaster, sir,” Hermione said. The other’s wished him a Merry Christmas as McGonagall, Hagrid, and Lupin joined him. All of the staff had skates strapped to their feet. Dumbledore’s looked particularly silly with their curled toes and sparkly laces.

“In order to join the feast, you’ll have to put these on,” he said winking, pointing at a row of ice skates lined up to the left of them. Each had a person’s name engraved on the blade.

“These fit perfectly!” one of the Hufflepuffs (her name was Olivia) cried out as she slipped on her pair. Harry nervously pulled his own on.

“Why so glum looking, Harry?” Lupin queried, doing a little twirl as he watched Dumbledore show Hannah how to tie the laces.

“I’ve never ice skated before,” Harry muttered pulling off a shoe and sliding his foot into the skate, though it was not the only thing plaguing him.

“We’ll neither have I,” Lupin offered winking, before pushing backwards and pulling a perfect triple toe loop. He glided back and grinned at the dropped jaws of Ron, Harry, and Hermione. “Its all enchanted.” Jade laughed throwing a snowball at him as she got up and gingerly tried the skates out, moving towards the center of the lake.

“It’s a ten, Professor,” she called as she glided away. Harry grinned half-heartedly just as Dumbledore skated over to them. In their exchange of nods, Harry knew that both Lupin and the Headmaster understood skating was the least of Harry’s worries.

“You’ll be seeing ‘Snuffles’ sooner than you think,” Lupin said to him quietly.

“He’s safe,” Dumbledore added with a wink. “Now time for some mischief.”

A few feet away, Fred and George magicked their skates on and began chasing each other on the ice, going at break neck speeds while hurtling snowballs at each other.

McGonagall was straightening a ring of holly she had wrapped around her hat when a Weasley snowball sailed her way and knocked it completely off. She turned and glared at them, whipping out her wand. Fred and George gulped and looked at Harry, Ron, and Hermione for help.

“Erm...s-sorry, Professor,” they said in unison, trying to hide behind each other. But the stern woman’s lips were still pressed in a very fine line. To everyone’s surprise, a wicked little smile slowly began to form on her face. Before either of the twins could utter “mercy!”, McGonagall had sent an onslaught of snowballs at them. They stood looking quite bewildered as the snowballs hit them one right after another, staring at the very poised McGonagall and the chortling figures of Dumbledore, Lupin, and Hagrid.

“You don’t want to get in a snowball war with me, Misters Weasley and Weasley,” McGonagall said sternly, though the smile remained on her face. At last, Fred and George burst into laughter and high-fived their professor. Jade, Harry, and Ron were laughing hysterically; Hermione still seemed to be in shock.

Within five minutes they were all equipped for getting around on the ice, and true to Lupin’s words, they glided about with ease, as if skating were human nature.

“Watch this!” Jade called picking up speed as she glided effortless around the ice. She picked up her feet and pulled off a very nice double toe loop.

“You call that skating?” Hermione replied good-naturedly. She in turn did a wonderful triple lux, Jade clapping politely.

“Come on then,” she called to Harry and Ron. “Let’s see something fancy.” The two boys looked at each other, then over at the festively set table. A rather mischievous grin formed on Harry’s lips.

“You don’t think we can jump that thing, do you?” Harry asked. Ron smirked.

“We’ve accomplished far more amazing feats,” Ron returned. They nodded at each other and skated towards the table, gathering speed, preparing to leap over it together. They were inches from it, feeling the light nimbleness in their feet. But before either could jump, a funny pulling force threw them back onto their rears.

“Ow...”Ron groaned. “What gives?” Little Professor Flitwick glided up to them.

“The skates are enchanted, not death proof,” he squeaked shaking his wand at them. Dumbledore laughed merrily as Snape joined them at the table from a nearby bonfire. The blankets of snow only emphasized his stark and sickly pallor, and gray was becoming more and more frequent in his greasy black hair. The Potions Master looked down at Harry and slowly put out a hand. Harry hesitated for a moment, wondering about Snape’s health and intentions, before allowing himself to be helped up.

“These are charmed so that even some one cursed ten times over with Jelly-legs could skate,” he said in a bitter sort of amusement. “You, Potter couldn’t stay on your feet in them.” Harry quickly let go of Snape’s hand. Count on him to be the biggest party pooper. Jade skated over and stood beside Harry.

“Are you all right, Professor?” she asked, her ready grin flopping at the sight of him. Snape eyed her with mild repulse.

“Peachy,” he returned flatly.

“Oh wow, that turkey looks good,” Ron exclaimed skating over to the table, which was now laden with every Christmas food imaginable. The remaining staff and students glided to the small, carpeted area in the center of the lake and look their seats. The feast began as the floating candles twinkled Christmas carols. After five goblets of wine, Hagrid began to sing along, urging McGonagall to join him. Snape looked thoroughly thrilled (obvious sarcasm here) when Lupin plopped a Father Christmas hat he had gotten from a wizard cracker atop the greasy head of hair.

“It’s a good look, Severus,” Lupin nodding his approval.

“Stop,” Snape returned monotonously, “you’re making me blush.”

Even Trelawney looked in relative good spirits (if that is at all possible), and chatted with Madam Pomfrey about pre-ordained death (a spirited subject). Madam Pomfrey looked as if she were refraining from disproving that theory by putting herself out of her own misery. Dumont was her more characteristic, illogical self, but Harry could have sworn a look of very intelligible scorn flew in the direction of Jade and Snape. The potions master said little as he prodded at the small helping of pudding on his plate. Harry nudged Hermione and pointed discretely at him.

“Does he look like he’s getting worse?” Harry asked quietly, as Ron attempted to slip a Canary Cream onto Jade’s plate. Hermione nodded thoughtfully.

“He’s been like that all year...” she murmured.

“And the way he reacts to Jade,” Harry added, ripping his bread roll into two. “How he always reacts to her as if she’s...I don’t know, a bad bout of the flu he doesn’t want to catch.”

“Maybe Snape has the same worries about Jade that Snuffles has,” Hermione whispered back. Harry was about to respond with a “yeah, right”, but just then, Jade had burst into bright yellow feathers. Ron had succeeded, sending them all into hysterics.

“You’re brilliant!” Mandy commended from several seats down, flinging her hair off her shoulders. Hermione rolled her eyes and ripped her dinner roll in half more violently than Harry could have managed.

“Humph! She wouldn’t know ‘brilliant’ if it smacked her in the head and gave her a free makeover,” Hermione was hissing under her breath. Harry raised an eyebrow. What did that have to do with anything they were talking about, or even about the rather funny “Jade bursting into feathers” thing?

“What?” he asked, baffled.

“Nothing,” Hermione muttered shortly.

All in all, it would have probably been one of the most uplifting events of the year...if only Harry wasn’t still wondering about Snape’s missions for Dumbledore, or Sirius’s lack of correspondence.

## 12. Visits to the Kitchen and other Surprises

“But the O.W.Ls are in a matter of *months!*” Hermione exclaimed from behind mounds of books and study packets. “We’ve already wasted loads of time and term starts in a week!”

“Hermione...” Harry said not taking his eyes off his Firebolt as he trimmed some bent twigs from the tail. “Have you never heard of the word, ‘holiday’?” Ron snorted from his reclined position on the rug, but quickly returned to playing the borrowed flute Hagrid had given Harry for Christmas his first year with one calculating glare from Hermione.

“Yes, I have,” she replied indignantly flipping open her Arithmancy book. “And that’s what we’ve been doing for the past week.” She looked rather flabbergasted at the boys who seemed unaffected by her words. She seemed to believe that they were earth shattering.

“Jade, come on, your Dark Arts skills could use some refining,” Hermione insisted turning her attention to Jade, who was lounging on a sofa, reading *Quidditch Through the Ages*. “As do those of the rest of us,” she added to remind the boys they had yet to escape her pressing. Jade peered over the top of the book at her and swallowed rather nervously.

“No they don’t,” she replied. “I’ve got months to refresh them.” Hermione shot her an icy gaze and Jade gulped. “But it would be good to get a head start, wouldn’t it?” she hastily added before putting the book down and getting up to join Hermione. As Jade stepped between Ron and Harry, she muttered “Accio”. Both the broom and pipe flew into her hands.

“What are you playing at?” Ron demanded, startled.

“I almost trimmed off half the tail, Jade!” Harry exclaimed glaring up at her.

“We’re all going down together,” she muttered pulling them out of their seats and dragging them to the cluttered table.

“Thanks for deciding to join me,” Hermione said sarcastically. “And don’t act like I’m torturing you, Jade. I just want us to do the very best we can on these exams.” It was with heavy hearts they obliged and cracked open their own books and study packets.

A couple hours later, Jade’s stomach let out a growl, answered by Ron and Harry’s.

“I s’pose I’m hungry,” she said matter-of-factly looking up from her constellation chart. She paused as if considering it, and when her belly rumbled once more. Ron and Harry snorted.

“Dinner was two hours ago!” Hermione exclaimed bewilderedly. “How on earth can you be hungry now?”

“Its all this studying Hermione,” Ron explained. “Goblin rebellions and shrinking potions does magic to human metabolisms.”

“I’m thinking Dobby could provide a nice little snack for us, if he’s back of course,” Harry said, having already told Hermione and Ron about the elf’s curious mission. Although they had kept Jade completely in the know of the going-ons of the past years and their own histories, Harry felt that the idea of the extreme difficulty of finding her parents might uproot her.

Hermione rolled her eyes. She got up and went over to her bag, pulling out two very pretty boxes. One was elegant, it’s lid held down by a satin ribbon imprinted with a scarlet seal, the other a vast box of sweets.

“Well go on,” she said plopping the boxes in front of them. “Maybe a little sugar might do us all a little good.”

“Amen,” Ron said picking out a chocolate frog. As Jade sucked on a Fizzing Whizzbee, she nodded towards the very beautiful box.

“What’s in that one?” she asked curiously.

"Chocolate, I think," Hermione said slipping off the ribbon and offering the box to her. It held beautifully crafted confections, shaped like exotic flowers and animals. Jade picked out a lovely rose colored one shaped like an owl in mid-flight and bit into it.

"Oooooh....goood," she managed. Harry and Ron each took one too.

"These rival Honeyduke's best," Harry muttered after finishing his piece. "They must have been pricey, since when have you been carrying all these sweets in your bag Hermione? Your parents are dentist." Ron took another piece and devoured it as Hermione went scarlet.

"Well, the chocolates are from Viktor," she said quickly, pushing the box aside and returning to her notes. "I've got the Christmas card upstairs..." At that Ron went into a coughing fit. He cleared his throat, eyes watering.

"Sorry," he muttered, but Harry knew Ron was anything but. Curious, Harry had once asked him what had happened to the rest of Krum's figurine (after finding the arm underneath his bed). Ron had simply held up a ball of melted plastic.

"What about the other box?" Harry asked in attempts to steer the conversation away from Krum while retrieving a box of Bertie Bott's from the other container of sweets. Hermione went even pinker.

"Dean Thomas," she muttered, eyes avoiding the faces around her. "He sent them as a thank you for helping him with the end of term exams, now on to Transfiguration—" Suddenly, Ron bent over the table hacking.

"What?!" he managed between coughing fits. "Dean?!"

"You're acting as if they were poisoned, Ron!" Hermione said shaking her head in disbelief. Harry snorted.

"You never know!" Ron choked.

"You all right?" Jade asked, concerned, patting him on the back as he coughed. Ron finally straightened up, red in the face.

"You be careful, Hermione," he said warily. "O.W.Ls are coming up...and you helped him before." Hermione raised an eyebrow.

"And what, Ron, do you mean by that?" she said evenly. "That now not only does it take compliments, it's going to take *sweets* to get me to cheat? For heaven's sake, I'm not you!" Ron's mouth dropped.

"That...that...was just plain mean!" he stuttered. Harry rolled his eyes and caught Jade's rather pleading look. He nodded, knowing that it was up to him to put an end to their arguing.

"You know, the sweets aren't doing it for me," Harry said rather loudly calling for their attention. "I'm still hungry."

"Yeah, me too," Jade hurriedly agreed. Hermione looked up at Harry, suddenly forgetting the argument between Ron and herself.

"You're not going to pull a Fred and George," she said warily. "Harry, you'll get in trouble, maybe get points taken away from Gryffindor."

"Relax Hermione," Harry replied, relieved that he could turn her attention so quickly. "Filch can't take points away from Gryffindor if we're not actually in term." Then he added with a rather mischievous grin, "and I can't get in trouble if I don't get caught." He walked over and exited through the portrait hole, as Ron (who seemed to place the argument second to the needs of his stomach) hollered for him to fetch a flagon of pumpkin juice while he was out.

Harry quietly made his way through the dark castle, careful to avoid any spot Mrs. Norris seemed to patrol most. He slipped down the grand staircase and through a corridor past the Great Hall that led to a dark stairway, and then another darkened passage. He passed the cheery paintings of food, searching for the one of fruit. He found it, tickled the pear and entered a door that had swirled itself into existence. He opened it to find a handful of busy elves preparing breakfast for the next morning.

“Hello,” Harry said entering, catching the attention of the bustling elves.

“Harry Potter, sir!” “Harry Potter has come to visit!” several of them squealed. Dobby was not among them and Harry assumed he was still in search of any word of Jade’s parents. The chatter resounded around him as they all temporarily forgot their duties. However, the noise abruptly ended as they peered around him, probably making sure a certain bushy-haired S.P.E.W founder was not accompanying him. Satisfied, they began to busy around him again, asking a multitude of questions.

“How are you all?” Harry asked, as one elf offered him tea.

“We are well, very well sir,” said a rather rosy fellow nearest him. “And what brings Harry Potter to visit us elves, sir?”

“Just a bit hungry,” Harry began to reply when a very high voice caught his attention. He turned to find an all too familiar elf with a tomato-like nose.

“Winky!” he exclaimed with a grin. He had last seen the elf last year in utter ruins, but tonight, she was standing upright, very alert, in an outfit expertly cared for. “All right there?” Harry asked. She smiled a bit and straightened the cap on her head, complete with two holes to accommodate her ears.

“Winky is all right now, Harry Potter,” she replied in her high, squeaky tone. She reached up, retrieved a case of butter beer and brought it to him. When he reached down to take it from her, she whispered, “I understand it is not Winky’s fault...just like you, sir.” Harry looked into her eyes and nodded. The elf that had blamed herself for the death of the Crouch family line because of her disobedience had finally come to terms. Harry patted her on the shoulder and nodded admirably; he wasn’t sure if he could say the same for himself.

“And you’re having a good time now, right?” he asked, straightening.

“Winky is catching on, sir,” she replied. The elves were now pushing in and shoving pasties and sandwiches into his arms, chatting excitedly as he complimented their wonderful work.

“And what about Dobby, is he back yet?” he asked in between the questions of which meat pie he’d prefer and how many flagons of juice he needed. The house-elves grew silent. One particularly small elf spoke up.

“Dobby is doing traveling, sir,” she said with a shiver. “The Headmaster is sending him on a holiday.” Harry nodded and smiled, knowing that they were keeping to Dumbledore’s orders not to reveal Dobby’s whereabouts. After thanking them and patting Winky awkwardly on the shoulder again, he entered exited, making his way through the darkened hall.

Harry thought about Dobby, and hoped (though it still seemed strange to him that Dumbledore would send a house elf) that his mission had found some news of Jade’s parents. As he entered the stairwell leading up to the grand staircase, a series of muffled thumps and voices made him snap back into real time. It came from a panel to his left, several steps up from where he stood.

“I told Filch to leave this entrance alone,” a cold voice snarled angrily. “Its got McGonagall’s lock charm on it.”

“Magic won’t open it,” another answered, equally annoyed, “maybe a little muscle will.”

“Always knew you were more brawn than brain.”

“On the count of three we’ll simply charge into it...careful you don’t break a nail.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Harry gapped in utter shock unable to move. Somebody was trying to get into the castle.

“One, two, THREE!”

A tremendous thump signaled the two men had thrown themselves mercilessly against the panel...to no avail.

“Ow.”

“Apparently your brawn and brain are relative equals.”

Snapping back into action, Harry stumbled quickly up the stairs, intent on alerting Dumbledore, but just as he came parallel with the panel where the voices came from, two men toppled out on top of him.

“AHHHH!” Harry yelled, the food items spilling from his hands.

“ARGH!” The two men cried out as they and Harry fell back down the stairs over his spilt parcels, landing with a clatter on the landing.

“My lucky day,” one of the men grumbled.” Harry, who was scrambling to his feet, wishing he had his wand or at least the Marauder’s map, suddenly froze. Narrowing his eyes at the figure that was now standing up, his jaw dropped.

“Sirius?”

“Harry?” his godfather asked surprised.

“POTTER!”

The second man was Snape. He stood, face pinched tight as if he had eaten something rotten, wand drawn.

“Oh no.”

“And what drove you from your common room tonight?” he hissed quietly. Harry stared at him, wide-eyed.

“My stomach?” Harry choked out.

“Harry!” Sirius cried out, shoving Snape aside and saving his godson from certain doom. “You scared me! Are you all right? Listen I’m really sorry about not sending you a Christmas gift, or at the very least, a Christmas card, its just that…well—you holding up well?”

“If you are done with the family reunion!” Snape snarled hotly, glaring at Black.

“WHAT is going on here?!?” A white-faced McGongall cried from the top of the stairs. She was dressed in a green tartan dressing gown, her hair pulled back in its signature bun underneath a nightcap. She nimbly made her way down towards the three. “Sirius? I didn’t know Severus was sent for you tonight.”

“He wasn’t,” Black said rather guiltily as if he was back in his fifth year, and had just been caught blowing up half the toilets in the school. “I saw Snape prowling about the grounds and followed him...”

“Do you need to speak to the Headmaster?” she asked, not yet noticing Harry.

“I’d like to, yes,” Black answered. “About…matters.” His gaze fell on Harry and McGongall’s eyes followed.

“Potter!” she exclaimed. “What are you doing?” Harry sighed defeated; caught by Snape *and* McGonagall within five minutes…it was a new record.

“Getting a midnight snack,” he answered, indicating the strewn food packages on the ground. He was going to have a detention until commencement.

“You of all people,” McGonagall sputtered, hands on hips. “Wandering in the middle of the night, alone! The least you could have done is dragged your friends along!” Harry had to force himself not to laugh watching Sirius fight back a snigger at McGonagall’s rather ironic suggestion.

“I think he needs punishment,” Snape inserted nastily, not yet pocketing his wand. McGonagall sighed and turned to the Potions Master.

"I think you also need to talk to Albus," she replied. Snape cast a quick glance at Harry as if trying to sway McGonagall's attention back to said Kitchen Looter. She surveyed the 'midnight snack', magicked it up in a neat pile and set it in Harry's arms.

"Back to your common room," she said sternly. "And I don't want to see you wandering about again."

"Yes, Professor," he said, astounded by his luck, and making a mental note to always use he's invisibility cloak.

"Come on Sirius, Severus, let's go see Dumbledore."

"Wait," Harry said to Sirius rather tightly. "Are you just going to talk to the Headmaster and leave?" It was a relief to be standing there, looking at his godfather, knowing that he was well, dressed in clean robes, looking as if he had had a few decent meals. Deep down, Harry desperately desired Black to stay so that they might talk and forget about Voldemort and Harry's always existent, impending doom.

"I'll come and visit in a bit, after business is done," Black replied, shrugging apologetically. "But only for a while." With no other choice, Harry walked with the three back up the steps and departed for the common room.

\* \* \*

"Sirius is here," Harry said bursting into the common room. Hermione and Ron blinked at him and looked over at Jade who was staring wide-eyed at the mention of that name. Harry's mouth fell open. They had never told her about Sirius.

"Sirius?" Jade asked quietly. "As in Sirius Black? The mass murderer?" At that, a flash of anger filled Harry and he practically threw the food packages onto the table before them, breaking a bottle of butter beer in the process.

"Jade," he said warily. "You can't say anything! Sirius Black is—"

"Innocent," she completed for him in a tone that suggested she was talking about something completely void of taboo, like the weather, instead of the likes of an alleged murderer. Harry, Ron, and Hermione gawked at her.

"He is," Harry agreed lowering his voice. "But—,"

"Dumbledore's told me about him when he was explaining the history of Voldemort to me," she answered. "I know that Black is innocent and that he is your godfather...and for some reason, I've sensed it ever since I met you Harry, before I could even say 'Sirius Black'." Harry was silent, but Jade's words didn't surprise him. It was like she knew what he knew, understood what he did long before he had even announced Black's arrival.

"How goes it?" Fred (or maybe it was George, Harry couldn't tell) asked from the stairs leading to the boy's dormitory. "Ah, butter beer, the wine of the most trouble-making of trouble-makers."

"I commend you all, seeing that our own looting legacy has influenced you all to create mischief of your own," George added (he had a large 'G' on the front of his sweater) grinning as he swiped one of the undamaged bottles of butter beer.

"You really ought to go and work on those engorgement charms if you want to complete improvements on your Ton-Tongue Toffee by January," Jade said loudly, reminding Hermione, Ron, and Harry that Sirius would be stumbling in at any moment.

"Er, Fred, George? Don't you have somewhere else to be?" Hermione asked nervously glancing at Harry. The identical faces looked thoughtfully at her.

"No," they answered in unison, clinking their bottles and throwing back their heads as they drank deeply.

"Please, you've got to jet off," Harry said pointing at the stairs.

"What's got your knickers in a bunch, mate?" Fred asked curiously.

“Forget it Harry,” Ron announced. “They’re not going to leave and they already know. Mum’s told the whole family already.”

“They know...about—?” Harry asked raising an eyebrow.

“Know ‘bout what?” George asked suspiciously. It was then the portrait hole opened and Sirius Black climbed in.

“I’m sorry Harry, but I can’t—,” Black stopped abruptly mid-sentence as he stared at Jade and the twin redheads. “Oh crap.”

Fred and George dropped their drinks.

“No, Sirius its all right,” Harry said walking up to Black and pulling him deeper into the room. “They know...everyone here does.”

“Mr. Black, sir?” Fred squeaked, eyes wide. He looked a bit like Dennis Creevey in the midst of awe.

“Yes?” Black said looking startled from being called “mister” and “sir” in one go.

“Very nice meeting you finally,” George said sticking out a hand nervously. Both the twins looked utterly ill. Black stared at the freckly out-stretched hand and hesitantly reached out to shake it.

“Are you two all right?” Black asked.

“Fine—” Fred answered.

“Never better,” George completed. “Er...sorry to boost on you, but we...er...my brother and I...er...we’ve got... Hermione? What have we got to do again?”

“Just go,” Ron said exasperatedly. Without arguing they nodded and disappeared up the stairs to the boy’s dormitories. “Sorry ‘bout them, Sirius,” Ron apologized. “They’ll never figure out that some business is too grave for their own good.”

“No, its all right,” Sirius said, but he didn’t make a move to sit down. “Dumbledore told me it would just be people who knew about me in Gryffindor tower tonight.” It took Harry a second to realize Black was only expecting Ron, Hermione, and himself. He figured Sirius could relax now that the twins were gone, but he suddenly remembered his godfather’s discomforts about Jade. Sirius was staring at her as she ogled open-mouthed at him, the puddle of butter beer from the broken bottle draining down her front.

“Sirius, this is Jade,” Harry said awkwardly pulling out a chair for Black. “Jade, this is my godfather, Sirius Black.” A strange and uncomfortable silence ensued as Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked uncertainly at each other. The portrait swung open with a sharp “swish” that seemed unnaturally loud. Lupin stepped in.

“Greetings,” he said cheerfully stepping over to meet his friend, who had yet to tear his eyes from Jade. “Dumbledore’s just informed me of your arrival—.” Then a funny worried edge fell upon his voice. “Which means you’re not watching Buckbeak...you didn’t leave him at my home unsupervised...” Sirius snapped out of it, tore his eyes away from the girl and nodded a hello.

“Moony,” Black said. “You talk as if I’d set a hippogriff on your sofa...”

“It wouldn’t be a first,” Lupin replied simply, drawing up a chair next to Jade. He pointed out the mess on her robes, and with Hermione’s help the spilt butter beer was cleaned up and Jade was once again dry. It would have been rather comedic if they didn’t understand about Sirius’s trepidations about Jade or the missions that were putting his freedom or even life on the line. It was then something very clear dawned on Harry...and by the looks on Ron and Hermione’s faces, on them as well. The Minister wasn’t happy with Dumbledore. Price, that official or whatever was hanging around an awful lot, and eyes often found their way to Hogwarts to keep watch.

“Well,” Sirius said awkwardly choosing a seat next to Harry. “As I was saying, I haven’t got much time—”

“What are you doing here?” Harry suddenly exclaimed vehemently. “The Ministry’s got their eyes glued to this place! You could have been caught and shipped right back to the dementors!” A barely noticeable shiver went through Black at the mentioning of those foul, soulless creatures—incapable of both sight and mercy.

“He’s right you know,” Hermione spoke up quietly. “Minister Fudge hasn’t been too keen on the Headmaster...they’re eyes everywhere.”

“I know that,” Black said softly meeting Harry’s gaze. “But you’ve got to trust that I’ve got enough smarts to weasel my way out of trouble to get what I need...and I needed to speak to Dumbledore.”

“The Ministry wouldn’t be able to catch him going through here anyway, Harry,” Lupin inserted. “He’s quite capable of staying under the radar—he did help create a certain map.” Harry had to force the grin from spreading on his face.

“I know,” he muttered. “But you can’t expect me to be happy about Sirius risking his neck all the time. Well, why’d you come anyway?”

“I don’t think I’m s’pose to tell you,” Black said hesitantly. “Even if you already know some of the facts.”

“Does it really take that much to ‘get the old crew together’?” Ron queried, raising an eyebrow.

“See, Remus?” Sirius said leaning back into his chair. “I can’t slip anything past them.” Lupin nodded silently and it seemed to be the okay he was searching for. “I had to deliver some information—” Sirius began before pausing abruptly. He looked up at Jade who had been utterly silent since he had stumbled into the common room. Lupin urged him to go on and he did with noticeably hesitance. “And I couldn’t risk a letter interception. I’ve been scouting around anyway, and figured Dumbledore could use an update.”

“That doesn’t seem important enough to jeopardize your freedom and maybe your...” Harry trailed off, unable to voice the fact that his godfather’s life was also on the line. He passed him a butter beer instead. “There’s been an Ministry official whose been around a lot...since Jade came here.” Harry stopped and looked up at her uncomfortably, but she seemed to not hear him. She was still staring at Black.

“Who’s the official?” Sirius asked after sipping from the neck of the bottle.

“Logan Price, Padfoot,” Lupin said matter-of-factly. Sirius’s dark eyes flashed.

“Wait a second,” Hermione suddenly said. “Does it seem odd at all to anyone that Price, who is head of the Department of International Relations, is leading this investigation on finding Jade’s parents?” Hermione looked at every face around the table, finally eyeing Jade.

“Maybe International stuff has been slow lately,” Ron supplied.

“They’ve extending the search for Jade’s family internationally,” Lupin explained. “Dumbledore believes that if Britain holds no whereabouts of Jade’s family, other countries may.”

“But Price seems to want more than just to find Jade’s parents,” Harry said.

“We have reason to believe the Ministry is using Jade as an excuse to keep a heavy surveillance on Hogwarts,” Lupin said. “On top of that, Logan Price comes highly recommended in the Ministry...he’s a young scholar...I believe he’s studied along side our own Professor Dumont at one point or another.”

“Percy’s yammered on and on about him all summer,” Ron huffed. “Not that I was listening or anything...he’s to busy worrying about pleasing the new Head he hasn’t even bothered to help out my dad with any...you know...other work. Too busy with his nose lodged up Price’s arse, I reckon.”

“And ever since what happened last year...” Hermione muttered, not even bothering to glare at Ron’s colorful language. “I’m sure they’d jump at a chance to keep a closer watch on Dumbledore. It seems the Minister would do anything to keep from being undermined.”

“Ever since the Triwizard games,” Jade murmured at last looking away from Sirius. “Every since Cedric Diggory died.” For some reason the mentioning of that accursed event without acknowledging Harry’s own trials and near escape from Voldemort sparked a blazing anger in Black.

“Ever since Harry was *nearly* killed by Voldemort!” he spat slamming a fist onto the table, hissing out the Dark Lord’s name with such heated acidity, it made everyone jump, even Harry. Jade’s downcast eyes were now locked on Black’s twisted face, strangely filled with a dark understanding. After a second she deviated her gaze, looking as if she was trying to stutter some sort of an apology.

“Calm down,” Lupin said putting his hand on his friend’s shoulder and glancing at Jade apologetically. Harry stared at his godfather in stark surprise, as Ron and Hermione took care that their own eyes did not stray on him. Sirius’s body relaxed and he slumped back into his seat, as if along with Lupin’s hand, the load of his trepidations suddenly pressed unbearably onto his shoulders.

“I’m sorry,” Black managed, shaking his head. Nervously he glanced up at Harry. “I just...the stress of everything. I’m not happy about the Ministry...I’m sorry.” A cricket sounded from somewhere in the common room, cutting through the thick air.

“I’ve got to go,” Sirius finally said, in a tone that was completely devoid of any heat earlier heard. “It was great seeing you lot again. Remus? Harry? Care to walk me to the entrance hall? You might want to take your father’s cloak...McGonagall’s already wary of your wanderings.” And after what looked like an internal struggle, he added, “nice to meet you, Jade.”

“Yeah, same here,” she replied, clearing her throat.

“Actually I was planning to sample some of these goodies our Prefect allotted for us,” Lupin said smiling a bit. Hermione began to insist none of the food stealing was her idea. Sirius congratulated her (not without noting that she would be Hogwart’s most mischievous Prefect since Lily Potter), as Harry, still shocked, slipped upstairs to retrieve his invisibility cloak. When he returned they all said goodbye before he and Black slipped out of the entrance hole.

For a while they walked in silence, the night pressing in on their ears like cotton balls, James Potter’s cloak tucked under Harry’s arm.

“What got into you, Sirius?” Harry finally said, stopping and turning his godfather round. “That was completely uncalled for! You just yelled at a girl as if she was the reason Voldemort returned!” A guilty look fell upon Black’s face.

“I told you Harry,” he said quietly this time unable to meet his godson eyes. “It was just everything I’ve had to worry about, and when she mentioned that boy’s murder without any regard to you...I was overcome with just how unfair everything is to you—even the Ministry.”

“That’s not all, is it?” Harry pressed. “All those subtle warnings about Jade in those letters you sent. Obviously you agree with the Ministry about one thing.”

“No I don’t,” Black replied and paused for a second, attempting to work out his own suspicions. “But Jade is a mystery,” he continued, “is that what Hogwarts needs right now? You know I trust Dumbledore to make the right decision...its just that her history could be anything, however slight the chances be...it could be *anything*.” Harry understood he was voicing the fears of Logan Price.

“But she’s my friend,” Harry said flatly. “I trust her, just like I trust Ron or Hermione...or you.” Sirius was silenced and they walked the rest of the way to the top of the Grand Staircase without speaking.

“And I also trust your decisions,” Black finally said to him.

“I wish you didn’t have to go,” Harry muttered. “But I guess I’ve got to trust your judgment too.”

“My duties, Harry,” Black corrected.

“Yeah.”

“Oh, nearly forgot,” Black said, reaching into his pocket. “Your Christmas present.” He handed Harry a small packaged wrapped messily in parchment. “I was going for creative on the wrapping,” he explained sheepishly with a grin. Harry couldn’t help but grin back as he ripped the parchment open. Inside was a Potions study guide, grade 5.

“Er...thanks?” Harry said, raising an eyebrow at Black. His godfather shook his head and winked mischievously at him.

“That’s not just any study guide,” he replied lowering his voice. “Over the summer Snape was leaning on my last nerve, so I stole his teacher’s plan book, wrote down all the things that would appear on his nasty exams and highlighted them in this study book.” Harry laughed out loud at the plan childishness of it all.

“Thought you could make use of it,” Sirius continued with a grin. “Ron too. I’m even sure Hermione can overlook her prefect morals for a peek or two.” They stood there and laughed, and for a moment Voldemort wasn’t planning his return to power, the Ministry wasn’t against Dumbledore, and Sirius was innocent in the eyes of all. As the last of their chuckles died away, Sirius surprised Harry and maybe even himself by wrapping his godson in a warm embrace...the kind James Potter should have been alive for to give his son. They stood there in the silence, a familiar burning was spreading to the corner of Harry’s eyes, and he swallowed down his anger at the injustice of it all. Sirius Black was the dirt off the boots of the dirtiest of kinds in the eyes of the Ministry, yet he was risking more than his freedom trying to save them all.

They hastily broke apart, both agreeing to a non-mushy and masculine handshake.

“Well, then,” Black said with a quick grin. “Keep writing.”

“It’d be nice if you’d keep free,” Harry return and Sirius’s grin widened at the dark humor. “You’ve got to fix all the damages Buckbeak’s doing to Lupin’s place as we speak.”

“Don’t let Remus know,” Black replied with a laugh and walked alone down the stairs, opening the door and disappearing out into the wintry darkness as Harry disappeared under his cloak.

## 13. So the Choices Inflict Wounds

Voldemort's features had a sunken-in quality—almost as if his empty heart was creating a vacuum inside his body. Harry could see every detail from the bone-whiteness of the Dark Lord's flesh to the scaly edges of his snake-like eyes. He could see every tooth in the gaping smirk, like unnaturally straight tombstones. It was all Harry could see: Voldemort, in his every incredible and great detail. The pain started from the tip of the peculiar scar on his forehead, spreading until his eyes began to throb. Harry struggled to turn away, knowing that if he didn't his eyes would melt right out of his skull. He could see a man cowering before the Dark Lord, whose blurred outlines seemed very familiar down to the barely visible goatee, but through the pain, he could not place him. And then he saw his mother like in the dreams he had before, but this time holding the strange green pendent in front of her...the Jade Guardian, Voldemort's spider-like hands reached for it. Harry could feel hot pokers sink deeper into his eyes and head as the bone-like fingers neared the pendent. The Dark Lord's hand yanked it from Lily Potter's grasp, and just as he did, a green light emitted from it, not the gold his mother had experience, but the green of the Avada Kadavra. However, before the light of the curse could touch Harry, the outline of the Guardian of the pendent flashed before him, sparing him, but not the familiar man with the goatee. His shadowy figure was dead on the ground before the laughing form of Voldemort.

Harry's eyes flickered open, but the images blurred, he felt sweat on his brow, the room was moving strangely, as if he had been ill and had awoken from a fever-driven dream. Now that he realized he was awake, he couldn't remember what woke him up, but he habitually ran his hand across his scar anyway, as if expecting it to be on fire. Slowly his heart rate slowed and his eyelids became heavy. Within minutes he had fallen asleep again, not ever knowing why his bed sheets were clenched so tightly in his hand.

\* \* \*

"Well," Ron huffed rather irritably at Harry, tearing the maroon Weasley sweater off. "I don't just want to dress in Muggle wear, I want to *look* good in it." Harry rolled his eyes and threw a pair of Uncle Dursley's socks at him. He had already voiced how irrationally concerned Ron was being about his wardrobe; it's not like the lanky red-haired boy never donned jeans and a sweater before. But it seemed Hermione's tales of London's rather classy and fashion-sensible reputation had somehow seeped into Ron's very stubborn brain.

"Why do you even care?" Harry yawned randomly tossing him another sweater.

"There are *girls* in the muggle world too, Harry!" he announced as if it were a little known, but very important fact he had to inform his best friend on.

"For god's sake," Harry returned running a hand through his signature, untidy hair. "Are you taking a leaf out of Parvati's book?"

"More like several chapters," Fred said entering their dormitory followed by his twin.

"You got two female types waiting outside for you two," George added. "I believe they're fervent on you coming down to breakfast—"

"—clothed, of course," finished Fred.

"Why can't mum add a little variety to life and move on from maroon?" Ron continued to whine, ignoring his brothers and ripping through his very limited wardrobe. It mostly consisted of the school uniforms and robes, and he was wearing his only pair of jeans that weren't high waters.

"Are you decent *yet*?" Hermione hollered from just outside. "Breakfast is in five minutes!"

"Yes!" Ron hollered back flopping onto the ground, tetchily examining his white undershirt. "And I know how to tell time, but what I don't know is what to wear!" The doors to their dormitory once again opened and Hermione and Jade entered.

"Come on Ron," Harry said standing up. "When have you *ever* cared about what you wear? I thought your motto was 'As long as I'm not starkers'."

"Do you not remember the dress robes?" Ron exclaimed raising his eyebrows.

"Oh yeah..."

"Your parents are going to be here any second," Jade announced poking at the hangings on the bed closest to her. "How about jeans and a sweater?" Ron shot her a warning glare and she grinned sheepishly back at him.

"For heaven's sake," Hermione muttered pushing her way into the now disheveled room. She picked up one of the maroon sweaters.

"Not that one, Hermione," Ron moaned. "That one's got a hole in the sleeve, and it's been too small for ages." Ignoring him, she pointed her wand at it.

"What color do you prefer besides maroon?" Hermione asked in a flurry of questions. "No hole? Granted. How about a nice turtleneck at the top? Fine. If you're not going to decide, it's going to be black." And with a few muttered charms and transfiguration spells, a knit, black, turtleneck lay in her arms. She tossed it to Ron as all spectators present watched with open-mouthed surprise.

"Think she'd go for a partnership in our company?" Fred asked his brother.

"I know who my study partner is going to be for Charms," Jade announced.

"Just put it on, Ron," Hermione said.

"I'd be afraid not to," Harry muttered receiving an annoyed glare from Hermione, as Ron stood up and pulled on the black sweater. He glanced at himself in the mirror and nodded approvingly.

"I think I look loads better," Ron declared, using his fingers to return the stylish chunks to the front of his hair.

"Just because the sweater does," George replied surveying his little brother. "Doesn't mean you do."

\* \* \*

As it had been since the beginning of the break, there was one table set in the middle of the Great Hall, and seated around it were the handful of students remaining for the holidays and Dumbledore along with several other staff members. Today however, it was all the merrier with the addition of the Weasley family. Ginny, who had gone down to breakfast early, was seated between her two older brothers, Charlie and Bill, chatting exuberantly about nothing in particular. Near the head of the table, seated on either side of Dumbledore were Mr. and Mrs. Weasley who seemed to be in deep conversation with the Headmaster and Professor McGonagall. Several seats down, in between two empty chairs, sat a rather solemn Percy who was taking extreme care in wiping his horn-rimmed glasses. He looked up as they entered and caught Harry's eye, but not for long as he quickly whipped his gaze away, without making a single acknowledgement to show he had seen them at all. It was Hagrid who first noticed their presence.

"All right there, Harry?" He called cheerfully. "Come on, there's room fer everyone."

"Ron!" Mandy exclaimed from a seat nearest him. "I love your sweater...its very dashing." Ron grinned and was about to make a move to sit down next to her when Hermione's voice stopped him.

"How nice of you to greet your family," she stated low and warily. Mrs. Weasley had leaped to her feet and proceeded to give them all hugs. As she hugged her sons (each towering over her) she lovingly asked if they were behaving. She gave Hermione an extra long hug (perhaps in attempts to make up for reading too deeply into *Witch's Weekly last year*) and by the time she got to Harry, her eyes were welling up with tears.

"Well now," she managed as she held close the floodgates (thankfully, thought Harry). "Smiling and all...you're doing all right."

"Yeah," Harry said and for the first time, he was beginning to believe it. "I've got some people who make sure of it." With that Mrs. Weasley smiled a little wider as she reached up and kissed him on the cheek before turning her attention to Jade; who suddenly seemed a bit unnerved as she watched Mrs. Weasley admire the sweater she had knitted for her.

"Thank you...for the, er, the sweater," Jade said blushing for the first time that Harry could recall. "It...I...I'm really—," She never finished because Mrs. Weasley had wrapped her in a motherly hug too. Jade's arms were stiffly held at her sides, her eyes wide in amazement. Everyone at the table silently watched her for what felt like several stand-still hours, until at last she brought up her own arms to return the hug. When they broke a part, a dazed smile was playing across her lips.

"I'm so glad to here you're starting to get bits and pieces of yourself back," Mrs. Weasley said softly. "The Headmaster's told us of how well you're coming along." Bill Weasley cleared his throat and stood up, the fang dangling from his ear swayed slightly from his smooth movements.

"Now mum," he said good-naturedly. "All this talking, means less time for introductions and food." He was dressed all in black and had a leather jacket draped across the back of his chair. "Jade is it? I'm Bill, Ron's eldest brother." For several seconds, Jade stared at him and his outstretched hand curiously. Harry cleared his throat a little, which jarred her back into reality. She shook Bill's hand, her cheeks reddening to a point that rivaled the Weasley's signature hair. Hermione stared at Jade in a bemused sort of way as she struggled to mumble a fumbled greeting

"Er...yes, I mean, nice to meet you," she managed before flashing a quick apologetic smile, trying to inconspicuously marvel at Bill's pony tail. Mr. Weasley introduced her to the rest of the Weasley family, but when introductions reached Percy, he was less than cordial. He seemed rather repulsed by Jade's out-stretched hand and made no move to shake it.

"It's Jade," she said awkwardly, unsure as to what to do now.

"As earlier stated," Percy snipped coldly. Charlie cleared his throat and jammed his elbow into his brother's ribs. With a muffled cry, Percy jumped from his seat. Wincing in pain, he finally reached out and quickly shook her hand. Jade recoiled a bit as Logan Price's personal assistant quickly ended the greeting. Dumbledore looked over at Percy and in those few seconds he held the young man's eyes, everyone present could feel the quiet authority the Headmaster radiated. The third eldest Weasley could not bring himself to look at either his family members or his former Headmaster after that.

"Er...right then, breakfast," Mr. Weasley muttered. "Don't want to be late for the ceremony." Mrs. Weasley laid a hand on his forearm as they took their seats. And as Mrs. Weasley and Bill started a volley of rather clumsy conversation, Harry noticed for the first time a strange heaviness in Mr. Weasley as he watched him stare at Percy, something like shame.

Jade silently began spooning porridge into her bowl, absentmindedly missing every other scoop. Ron was too busy scowling at Percy to notice, but Bill did.

"Hey," he said reaching over and taking the ladle from her to catch her attention. "Don't mind my brother, he's pretty much a mindless git."

"It's not his fault, really," Charlie added slipping a piece of bacon into his mouth. "It's hard to think properly when your underwear is cutting off your circulation."

"What, is he wearing them on his head now?" Bill asked in mock surprise. However somber Percy's attitude had made Jade, the reception from Ron's other family members brought her usual self back. Despite it all, a snigger escaped her and she grinned thankfully at Bill and Charlie.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley began to converse softly with Dumbledore, Lupin, and McGonagall, then the rest of the table relaxed, creating their own brand of noise and clatter. Except Percy, that is. He still found himself between two empty chairs, stiffly munching on his rather burnt toast. Too bad Dumont wasn't there, Harry thought. They would have been real pals. But then again, Sirius wasn't thrilled about Jade staying at Hogwarts either...

"You see?" Ron snapped irritably, pushing his food around on his plate. "Percy's the Ministry's puppet...if I were Dad, I'd disown him." Hermione sighed sympathetically, seeing that Ron's family was witnessing their own parting of the ways.

"He'll turn around," she whispered back reassuringly. "The Ministry can't turn their back on You-Know-Who forever...and neither can Percy."

"Maybe a good kick in the head will jump start his senses," Ron muttered.

"This is ridiculous," Harry replied softly. "Your father stopped Death Eaters...you'd think Percy and the Ministry would concentrate on that threat before starting on Jade. In their minds she's guilty, and of what? Being a good person?"

"I know," Hermione agreed as Ron nodded his agreement.

"Thanks."

Jade's voice startled the three who had failed to realize she was no longer conversing with Bill and Charlie and had overheard the better part of their conversation.

"For what?" Ron asked looking as if he'd just been caught picking his nose. "I mean we're just stating the obvious." At that Jade grinned a bit wider.

"Just thanks," she repeated. "I think you all know for what."

\* \* \*

At a quarter to ten, everyone departed from the breakfast table and either made to their own offices and common rooms or accompanied the Weasleys to the entrance hall, where they were to be seen off. Mandy Brocklehurst was talking with Ron about London, exclaiming how lucky he was to finally be able to explore its muggle attractions.

"For god's sake, it's not the home of the Seven Wonders," Hermione muttered rolling her eyes as Mandy plucked a bit of minuscule lint off Ron's black sweater. Harry was getting the feeling that Hermione was mentally kicking herself for conjuring it up.

"Thank you, Professor Dumbledore," Mr. Weasley was saying shaking the wizened man's hand.

"No, no," Dumbledore said shaking his head. "It is us who should be thanking you. It may have taken the Ministry this long to see your worth, but we have known it for a long time." McGongall and Lupin agreed and in turn shook hands with him. Mrs. Weasley beamed proudly at her husband.

"We do what we can," she said pushing Ginny's hair behind her ear. "But as I promised you, Headmaster, we will continue supporting you and the Order."

"The carriages just pulled up," George called out, peeking through the open front doors.

"Oh good bye, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said squeezing him tight in another hug. She pulled away and held him at arms length. He had finally beat her in height "You take care, and we'll be seeing you this summer, I expect." At that Harry grinned and readily agreed as she made to say good-bye to Hermione and Jade.

"We're off," Mr. Weasley said, turning to shake Harry, Hermione, and Jade's hand good-bye.

"Congratulations," Jade replied. "It was an honor meeting you." At that a huge smile broke onto the balding man's face. The comment made his whole self seem considerably lighter than earlier that morning.

"And you," he replied. "All of you really...Harry, Hermione...you all have been through more than anyone can account for and survived. We'll be seeing you soon." Ron had detached himself from Mandy and had joined them, wrapping a scarf around his neck (the black and orange Chudley Cannons one Hermione had gotten him, of course).

"All right then," Harry said slapping his best friend on the back. "Don't leave too much destruction in your wake. Say 'hi' to all the muggle contraptions for me."

"Sure thing," he returned grinning as he pulled on his coat. "If I don't get killed in the *Thunderground*, that is."

"That's the *Underground*, Ron," Hermione muttered. "Honestly, the least you could have done is read up on muggle studies before today."

"Why, when you're around?" he asked plainly. She scowled at him and he nudged her with his elbow. "Thanks for helping me with the sweater thing by the way, that was brilliant." Hermione's face brightened.

"Anytime," she replied cracking a small, pleased smile.

"Yeah, Mandy thinks it makes me look dashing." The smile turned into a scoff.

"Have fun," Jade said clapping a hand on his shoulder. "And bring me back a cool souvenir."

"We'll bring you back Percy sedated and wearing a foam Big Ben hat, How's that?" Bill joked joining them, buttoning his leather jacket. Jade grinned and blushed again.

"Come on now!" Mrs. Weasley called as she and Mr. Weasley led the way to the carriages, Ginny arguing with Fred and George about petrol being more explosive than Filibuster fireworks behind them.

"Got to boost," Charlie called saying good-bye to them and pulling both Ron and Bill out the doors into the beautiful winter morning where the carriages stood plainly against the white, snow-covered landscape.

\* \* \*

After Harry, Hermione, and Jade watched the last of the carriages carrying the Weasleys disappear down the pathway and through the gates, they spent the rest of the morning in their Defense against the Dark Arts class. Even with the extra studying and her innate intelligence, she found the subject hard to grasp. Hermione was determined to help her catch up, as was Lupin, who had spent a lot of time with Jade in the days past when she didn't seem capable of communicating. Remus assured Jade however that it was very unsurprising that the subject was hard for her. Defense against the Dark Arts was a very new standard lesson, and in most institutions, only been taught for the last fourteen years. Its guidelines for study also varied with instructors, schools, geography, and years; so one who is thoroughly trained in Dark Arts Defense one year in one country, could be completely incompetent the next in another country. For several hours, Harry watched Hermione and Lupin go over lesson after lesson (many he recognized from his first year) with Jade as she furrowed her brow and attempted each example or wrote down notes furiously on several loose pieces of parchment. After lunch, Harry couldn't bear to witness another tutorial, so he excused himself, logically noting that he wasn't helping much anyway. Wishing them luck, he walked lazily about the school, before retrieving his broom, deciding he'd take advantage of the empty pitch and work on bludger dodging.

Carrying his beloved Firebolt across shoulders, he pushed open the massive front doors of Hogwarts castle and stepped onto the white winter blanket of snow. He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply, relishing the quiet, pushing away the many worries and fears that sat like stones in his stomach. Flinging one end of his scarf over his shoulder, he mounted his broom and took flight in one solid, fluid motion. Harry began to make towards the pitch when the wonderful solace took hold of him, encouraging a rather mischievous smile to spread on his face; why experience flying in the confines of a stadium when the entire grounds could be your quidditch field? He sailed upwards and around in the opposite direction of the Quidditch field, feeling the adrenaline build in his bloodstream as he made hairpin turns around the tall turrets of Hogwarts castle. Flying hadn't been this exciting since he had sped after Neville's Remembrall Malfoy had thrown during his first flying lesson. Now he dove beneath a bridge and made for the lake with perfect ease, closing his eyes against the bitter, yet refreshing cold. The lake drew nearer and he could make out Hagrid's hut nestled along the trees just outside the forest. Harry sped across the surface of the frozen water, so close that he could reach down and skate his fingers across the ice. With ease, he changed directions, making for the clearing before Hagrid's hut.

“Watch out now!”

The voice whipped Harry back into reality, and just in time to see the amiable half-giant standing directly in front of him, his arms loaded down with books. Harry gasped surprised, and tried to slow down, but he was flying too fast and was too close. Hagrid sensing Harry’s inability to stop threw his large mass aside to avoid a collision just as Harry zoomed past and tumbled onto the snowy ground.

“Harry!” Hagrid called standing himself up. “You alright? Yer not hurt?”

“No,” Harry replied standing up himself and grabbing his broom. “I’m really sorry, I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

“Naw, it’s okay,” Hagrid said, before lowering his voice and adding with a mischievous grin, “I can see why all those Slytherin’s are scared of yeh during those quidditch matches, I can.” Harry shook his head and grinned, then helped Hagrid gather his multitude of volumes. In the five years Harry had known Hagrid, he had never seen the half-giant within five feet of a book...and now he seemed to be transporting half the library to his hut. As Harry picked up several books with quickly dampening pages, he curiously glanced at the covers. *The Man and his Giant Counterpart*, *The Large Savage*, *Understanding the Habits of the Giants*...all the books seem to have a common subject.

“Hagrid,” Harry questioned as they made their way to the familiar hut in the distance. “Why so fond of reading all of a sudden?”

“Oh,” he replied, then gazed about silently as if buying some time to search for the answer. “Well, yer see...er...yeh know... int’restding stuff in books...summat like...er...yeh know, int’restding stuff.” One look from Harry and Hagrid gave up. He sighed and replied, “ Ah Harry...I can’t tell you.” Harry was about to retort, growing more and more annoyed at everyone’s need to keep him out of the loop. Its not like he didn’t know what was going on in the world...but he decided to not press the subject and helped to gather the rest of the books, broomstick tucked under one arm.

Together they went into Hagrid’s hut, greeted by the ever-adoring Fang. His large black front paws fell onto Harry’s chest flinging Harry backwards, his broomstick and books he was helping to carry scattering around them.

“Nice to see you, too,” Harry grinned scratching the boarhound behind the ear before gently pushing him off. Standing up, he surveyed the one-room cabin as Hagrid busied himself making tea and fussing about the steady growth of the silk morders. On the table, there were yet more books (about Giants, Harry conjectured), and Hagrid pushed them aside to make room for a plate of warm treacle fudge, spilling a pile of parchments.

“Ah now...always makin’ a mess an’ all,” Hagrid groaned bending to pick them up. “Now, now, Harry, don’ cha worry ‘bout it.”

“It’s okay, I’ve got them,” Harry insisted as the teakettle let out a cheery whistle. He gathered them somewhat neatly and was about to place them on the table when the top parchment caught his eye. It was a letter...from one Arabella Figg. The name was like a clear bell ringing in the distance of his memory. Where had he heard it before? His gaze began to travel through the letter, unable to stop. Normally, Harry would never dream of reading something as private as someone else’s mail...especially that of a friend’s, but the first few lines drew his eyes like bait drew fish.

*Hagrid,*

*I know both Madam Maxime and yourself have been quite preoccupied with Giants located near Sicily, but Sirius and I have tracked the Death Eaters to Bulgaria. You can see that extending a hand of friendship to the clans here has first priority in your rounds. Voldemort is not slowing his search for comrades, and help is needed to ensure...*

“Blimey, Harry, I’m fresh out of—,” Hagrid’s face fell as he turned to Harry, floral printed oven mitts on, an empty milk jug gripped in one hand.

“Sirius is tracking Death Eaters?” Harry asked numbly, the shameful feeling of peeking into a private letter miles away now. “He’s *following* Voldemort?” The gentle half-giant flinched at the mentioning of that name.

“Yeh weren’t meant ter read that,” Hagrid said lamely.

“This is his mission,” Harry continued ignoring Hagrid’s blatantly obvious statement. “He’s actually tailing the...the *thing* that once was the greatest Dark Wizard ever?”

“Now Harry—,” Hagrid tried.

“And nobody would tell me,” Harry replied simply letting the parchments flutter to the ground. Hagrid finally put the milk pitcher down and removed his oven-mitts.

“He’s safe yeh know,” Hagrid replied softly. “He’s not brainless or nothin’, yeh know that. And he’s got tha’ Arabella with him. I reckon...” Hagrid paused, looking a bit pained, “*Voldemort* would shiver at night knowin’ she’s after ‘im.” Harry sighed and began to pick up the twice fallen parchments.

“I’m sorry I peeked at your letter,” Harry mumbled, feeling more like a child at fifteen than he did playing with junk toys under the stairs at eleven. He was completely helpless when it came to Sirius’s safety. He couldn’t throw a fit...and even if he asked Sirius to pull out of Dumbledore’s missions and stop putting his life on the line, he already knew the answer. Sirius would never quit fighting Voldemort as long as one of them was still alive...and deep down Harry knew he wouldn’t either.

Hagrid took the parchments from him and placed them on the table. They were both silent as he poured the tea, pushing the plate of fudge towards Harry who declined not because of their teeth-cementing value, but because of his loss of appetite.

“Sirius Black wouldn’t have it any other way,” Hagrid said, breaking the silence, he’s lolling accent almost sharp in the quiet room. Harry nodded. Hagrid had voiced his own thoughts.

“So are you going to Bulgaria too?” Harry finally managed. Hagrid looked at him with a funny look in his beetle-black eyes...it resembled Neville’s face whenever he found himself struggling with a hefty problem. Those eyes trailed from Harry, to the letter, then to the clutter of books on giants, and finally back to Harry.

“It’s a lil’ late to pretend I don’t know nothin’, isn’t it?” Hagrid asked hopefully. Despite himself, Harry let out a laugh and nodded.

“Well then, yes,” Hagrid continued a twinkle coming back to those friendly beetle-black eyes. “I’m going ter meet Olympe in Bulgaria where we’re gonna try to talk to the giants...I’ve gotten me studyin’ done these past months...getting good at giant peace talks, I reckon.” He winked, but Harry was sure the large man before him was still trying to decide if Dumbledore would be okay with his spilling the beans.

“I know you are,” Harry said taking a sip of tea. “Dumbledore is a lucky wizard to have you on his side.” At that, Hagrid was simply beaming. Tears of humble happiness glittered in the corners of his eyes as he reached out and cuffed Harry on the shoulders, so hard that Harry nearly nose-dived into his cup of tea, glasses and all.

\* \* \*

An hour later, Harry was flying slowly back to the castle on his Firebolt, absentmindedly twisting around the occasional tree or statue. He felt no better than he did the night Sirius came and gone, but he knew it was useless to mope. He guessed that worrying was part of the territory of being a godson, and suddenly understood why Sirius could be so driven about Harry’s own safety to recommend halting Hogsmeade trips.

“Sirius has Arabella Figg with him,” Harry muttered to himself, remembering now who she was. She was one of the people Dumbledore had requested Sirius to call up, a brilliant auror and dueler according to Hagrid. Though Harry was within view of the massive front doors, he didn’t see anyone come out of them because he was so lost in thought. He didn’t snap out of it until a well-aimed snowball caught him directly in the head.

“Oof!” Harry grunted in surprise, suddenly thrown off his balance and tumbling onto the snow.

“Pity you can’t dodge snowballs as well as you do bludgers,” Jade grinned as she walked over to help him up.

“Couldn’t stand any more diagrams of silver bullets and holy water, could you?” Harry retorted brushing the snow off his robes, before pointing to something over her shoulder. “Hey, what’s that over there?” She turned to look and Harry landed a revenge snowball neatly into the back of her head.

“Very nice,” she laughed, grabbing her heart and falling backwards onto the snow.

“How was your study session?” Harry asked, using his hovering broom as a seat.

“Dismal,” she groaned. “And not officially over.” Harry looked at her curiously and she grinned back rather guiltily.

“Hermione and Professor Lupin found they needed a refresher course themselves when they hit chapter 14 of book two, so I took the opportunity to simply...disappear.” She groaned then turned over onto her stomach, her cloak completely covered in the white, icy powder, and for a moment she looked as if she were considering smothering herself in it. “How is it that some subjects like Transfiguration or Potions come to me like second breath, while all the Defense against the Dark Arts lessons can vanish in my mind...like my memory.” At that, Harry leaped off his broom and stood rather uncomfortably, not knowing whether he should be encouraging or sympathetic.

“You don’t think there’s a chance they’re hanging out together in the back of my skull, do you?” Jade asked furrowing her brows thoughtfully. Harry couldn’t help it, he broke into a grin and laughed, feeling a little of his former worries drift away again.

“You’ll get it,” Harry insisted between chuckles. “You’re a pro at some really hard subjects...Defense is easy compared to those...you’ll catch on.”

“You forgot to mention my need to catch on—,”

“Arithmancy!” Hermione hollered from the front doors. “Jade! Why are you outside? We still need to work on Arithmancy!” She began to trudge through the snow towards them, her hands tucked into her school robes as she had failed to put on her cloak.

“What would I do without her?” Jade sighed watching Hermione make her way over.

“What would any of us do without her?” Harry replied good-heartedly.

“Be slightly better than squibs, I s’pose.”

“You’re chapters behind in Arithmancy, Jade,” Hermione said as she finally joined them. “How were the flying conditions, Harry?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Harry said. “Unless you mean flying conditions in Hagrid’s hut. We had tea.” Hermione grinned.

“Always one to stick to projected plans,” she stated picking up the Firebolt that was now lying on top of the snow, turning her attention to the girl sprawled beside it. Hermione raised an eyebrow at her and nodded her head sarcastically (if that is at all possible...but if it is, Hermione is capable of it).

“Yes, I can see how you’re doing so much studying while trying to drown yourself in snow.” Jade groaned melodramatically and plunged her face into it for good measure, making both Harry and Hermione burst into laughter.

“Okay,” Hermione said shivering a bit now. “Can we at least attempt scholastic-driven suicides in the castle? It’s freezing out here.” Jade got to her feet as Harry pulled off his cloak and wrapped it around Hermione’s shoulders. Together they made their way back to the castle where she and Jade spent the rest of the afternoon studying together while Harry actually managed to tackle some homework assignments.

\* \* \*

After dinner, Harry led Hermione and Jade out to the Entrance Hall to wait for Ron, the Weasley twins, and Ginny.

"I think I'm through with Arithmancy, Hermione," Jade announced rather somberly.

"You can't!" Hermione replied wide-eyed. "If you drop Arithmancy you'll have to take that dreadful Divinations class!"

"It can't be worse than decoding my past with numbers," Jade replied. "Professor Vector is completely certain my history will pop off the pages of *Introduction to Arithmancy*."

"But..." Hermione said looking horrified at the thought. "Divinations...it's a horrible waste of time."

"Possibly a waste of time I'll pass with decent marks."

"Ah..." Harry interrupted, accompanying his mimicked misty tone with dramatically waving fingers. "I see that you are very correct. You must possess the Eye."

"Yes," Jade agreed. "I've got two of them." Shaking her head, Hermione attempted to keep a smile from forming on her face.

"We can just study a little more—," she said as a last argument.

"It's been done," Jade sighed. "We've tried everything. And it's awful hard to concentrate on that and Defense Against the Dark Arts. But thanks, only a good friend would try so hard." Hermione grinned a bit and kicked at the corner of the area rug.

"What time are they due back?" Harry asked glancing down at his watch.

"Eight o'clock, I think," Hermione replied. They sat and watched as two Hufflepuffs departed from the Great Hall before milling slowly up the stairs.

A little before eight the sound of a carriage just outside the massive doors brought all three of them to their feet.

"He's back," Jade said happily. "I hope he brought me a foam Big Ben hat...I don't really need a sedated Percy after all." Harry grinned and walked the length of the entrance to open the doors, but before his hand even touched the curling, brass, handles, it was flung open, sending him sprawling backwards.

"Never thought you'd be that excited about coming back to school," Harry groaned, wincing as he stood up. He was going to add another smart remark but was silenced by the strained look on Ron's face. It was twisted in a way that darkened his features. The cold had paled his cheeks so that the spray of freckles across his nose stood out alarmingly. He was gripping his new scarf tightly in one hand. Within seconds of entering, he brushed past his best friend who was staring after him, bewildered. Fred, George, and Ginny followed him, all with faces as crest fallen as their brother's.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked concerned, stopping Ron by placing a hand on his shoulder. When Ron only turned his head away, she looked to Ginny for an answer. The younger girl's cheeks reddened as she tucked a bit of her vivid red hair behind her ear.

"Percy," she replied. "He's...he's..."

"A god damn, bloody, prat!" Ron exploded scaring a doddling Ravenclaw into sprinting up the stairs in record time. Harry's jaw dropped. Sure, Ron was famous for his colorful language, but it was the first time Harry had ever heard so much venom behind the words...not to mention it was aimed at a member of Ron's own family.

"What about him?" Harry asked cautiously. Ron only shook his head and punched the air violently, making both Hermione and Jade jump.

"He outwardly announced he'd serve the Ministry's every order," George broke in, the strange solemn manner in his voice; a near paradox to his usual character. "During a press interview with dad and the family."

"He told the *Daily Prophet* even though the Ministry has its heroes, it will always be the actually champion...that even though Dad had done great good by stopping those Death Eaters, the Ministry would have eventually prevailed on their own," Ginny added.

"You can quote him on that," Fred said kicking the banister he stood beside.

"He practically disclosed everything Dad's done behind the Ministry's back!" Ron exclaimed pushing Hermione's hand away. She drew away surprised as Jade gently placed a hand on her arm.

"I only hope no one at the Ministry reads so far into what he said," George said quietly. "I only hope he'll keep his big trap more shut than he has today."

"Do you think Percy could keep secrets from Logan Price?" Ginny whispered quietly.

"Logan Price and Percy seem to share the same idea about Jade," Harry murmured. George and Fred looked at each other uncomfortably.

"Dad's worked too hard," Ron continued as if he heard nothing of the conversation around him.

"Percy hasn't got enough sense in him to fill a thimble. How can he deny his own father, about something as sure as....as—," Ron sucked in a breath of air and hissed the rest of his thought out from behind clenched teeth. "Something as sure as Voldemort's rising. Does he think that Dumbledore would lie about something like that? Does he think Harry would? Dad even?"

"He just has to find out on his own," Jade tried. "My being here isn't helping that I suppose."

"That isn't your fault," Harry insisted to Jade, before turning to face Ron. "But Jade's right...no one can make Percy believe but himself."

"He's so impressionable—," George muttered.

"—that I could make a nice impression of my foot in his face," Fred completed.

"Percy doesn't care," Ron said in a defeated sort of way. "Not about stopping Voldemort, not about Dad, or us, or innocent people...he doesn't bloody care."

"But you do," Hermione said. "That's something." She hesitated and added quietly, "Viktor said he could tell you did the way you were so ready to stand behind Harry and me."

"What does Vicky know?" Ron spat. "He's probably off parading with that Ex-Death Eater Karkaroff...of course Percy doesn't care about them either." Hermione's hurt look turned into a contorted face of anger.

"We're only trying to help!" she said shrilly. "You don't have to rip into us!"

"Come on, calm down," Jade broke in. "This isn't getting us anywhere."

"What's your dad going to do about Percy?" Harry asked Ron. George answered for him.

"I reckon that's the end of Percy knowing any of the plans from Dumbledore," he said trying to keep the hurt from his voice. "From now on, Dad and Percy have parted their own ways...which means so have to rest of us." Ginny nervously fidgeted with the sleeve of her turtleneck and Fred put an arm around her.

"Come on, Ron," Harry said putting a hand reassuringly on his friend's shoulder. "I've still got some butter beer stashed up in the common room."

"Er...no you don't—," Fred said.

"—we drank that ages ago." George finished.

"Great," Ron replied flatly and began to climb the stairs pulling away from Harry rudely. Harry pushed a hand through his hair, making it stand up more wildly than it usually did, as he refrained from purposely stomping on Ron's foot in return. He was aiming to understand. Hermione on the other hand, wasn't going to let Ron get away with the cold shoulder even if he was hurting.

"Honestly!" she exclaimed pushing past him angrily. "We only want to help you!" And with that she whirled around on the stairs and climbed them so quickly she remained several feet ahead of the rest of them as they made for Gryffindor Tower.

"I'm sorry, Ron," Jade said quietly to the tall, lanky form beside her. "Your family doesn't deserve this."

"I know," Ron returned.

"Percy will come around," she continued. "He hasn't revealed your father yet, and he's known the secret plans under Dumbledore for a while now...that's something."

"It'll just take time before he spills the beans," George said.

"Percy mirrors his mentors," Fred added.

"And his mentors are Logan Price and Cornelius Fudge," Ginny replied worriedly.

"Something's stopped him from telling up till now," Harry said looking over at the group made up of somber red-heads and a quiet raven-haired girl. "Let's hold on to that."

"Codswallop," Hermione said heatedly to the Fat Lady upon her reaching the familiar portrait.

"No need to be hissy," the Fat Lady replied and swung open. Jade nudged Ron before he could follow her through the entrance hole.

"You'd better apologize," she whispered nodding towards Hermione who was already halfway into the common room. Ron glanced at Harry who nodded his agreement. They all clamored in. Ginny took to her dormitory immediately wishing them good-night quietly, while Fred and George slithered through a secret entrance to a passageway under the boy's spiraling staircase, which would eventually lead them to the kitchens.

Harry followed Hermione deeper into the room intent on making sure his friends said good night on good terms, but before he could say anything, she had taken note of an owl that was perched on a high open window. It fluttered down to her as she approached it.

"Hermione," Ron said stepping cautiously towards her just as she took the letter from its grip. "I'm sorry, I know I was being really, incredibly rude...but Percy..." Hermione didn't look as if she were paying any attention as she examined the envelope. Harry and Jade looked at each other curiously, while Ron continued on with a rambling apology.

"I know I've got a temper...Hermione! Are you even listening?" Ron asked completely frustrated now as she ripped opened the letter. Jade took the envelope from her.

"It's from Vicktor Krum," she said.

"So reading a letter from Krum is on your list of priorities before listening to me busting up my ego for your enjoyment?" Ron exclaimed. "I'm apologizing! How many times is *that* going to happen in our lifetime? Yeah, make sure Krum says 'hi' to that Karkaroff for me while you're at it—,"

"He couldn't," Hermione said, the chilled shaking of her voice silencing him instantly. "Karkaroff's dead."

## 14. The Ministry Returns for Jade

Karkaroff, former Death Eater and Headmaster of Durmstrang, who had fled from the Triwizard Tournament last year was dead. He was marked the night he did not return to Voldemort's circle, and his murder shouldn't have been a surprise to Harry, Ron, or Hermione. But it wasn't his death that particularly dragged down the rest of their holiday. It was the fact that the *Daily Prophet* had not mentioned it in the least. According to the widely read wizard's publication, the death toll remained at nine. To everyone but them, it was uplifting news, calming many tempers enraged against the Ministry's failure to prevent those deaths, because it meant there has been no further Death Eater activity since the night Arthur Weasley caught three of them (whose identities had remained undisclosed)...and most importantly, no murders since October. Its last piece about anything remotely resembling a threat by Dark Arts other than several days of solid reporting on Mr. Weasley's award was one revolving around an interview with the Minister and several Ministry Wizards...including Percy Weasley.

*"The three suspects caught by Mr. Weasley and his team of investigators,"* Cornelius Fudge was quoted, *"have been thoroughly questioned and examined. Under an analysis by the Board of Committees, it is easily inferred that these undisclosed suspects were not acting upon the orders of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, but rather the outlandish rumors sparked by last year's Triwizard Tournament at Hogwarts School and the beliefs of an unnamed, but possibly unstable child who happens to be the only person to ever survive an attack by You-Know-Who."*

"Fudge has got a real knack for being subtle," Harry had said bitterly, thinking angrily about the Minister practically spelling out that he, Harry Potter (official title, "The Boy Who Lived") was nuttier than squirrel poop. To add insult to injury, Fudge had labeled Harry a "child"...being fifteen years old, escaping the Greatest Dark Wizard of the twenty-first century twice, not to mention being completely smitten with a girl a whole grade above him were all facts that couldn't even earn him a slightly more dignified title, such as "delinquent, young man". Harry wasn't the only one who was dealt a low blow. By the end of the article it took Hermione, Jade, and Harry hours to convince Ron that flying to London on a stolen broom to beat his brother up would not solve anything.

*"It's utterly ridiculous to jump to conclusions that these crimes against man were committed because You-Know-Who has actually returned,"* Percy was quoted. *"There is no valid proof of His return, and if there were, the Ministry would be the first (and has been the first in the past) to put down such a threat to our peaceful existence. Anyone who thinks otherwise has either been poorly misinformed or is too blind to see the facts."*

The *Daily Prophet*'s failure to mentioned Karkaroff's death by Death Eaters was a sure sign that the Ministry was holding back information...and maybe even keeping a cap on what reporters wrote and published. Even Hermione admitted (through gritted teeth) that Rita Skeeter, infamous for dishing the dirt, might have been beneficial to them all.

Krum had kept Hermione completely up to date with the going-on's in Bulgaria and other parts of Europe. He had written that Karkaroff's body was found near a small Scandinavian, muggle village. The Dark Mark had pinpointed the body's location. However, information on his murder were also being kept hush-hush by the Ministries of Bulgaria and Scandinavia, consequences of agreements with the U.K.'s Ministry department of International Magical Relations. The head of the department, a man who dressed in a long over coat and top hat by the name of Logan Price had visited both countries personally. Since last year, Viktor had apparently created a small network for information on the movement of Death Eaters and proof of Voldemort's return after the outcomes of the Triwizard Tournaments. Harry would be lying if he said he wasn't even a little thrilled with having the support of one the greatest seekers of his time.

The only other people who seemed aware of the latest murder was the staff at Hogwarts. Sirius had informed Dumbledore on the matter and sent regards from both Hagrid and Madam Maxime. Even though Snape had disappeared since shortly after Christmas, Harry was sure he knew exactly what had happened. However, Hermione had brought up something unsettling, suggesting that if Snape was indeed spying on the Death Eaters and couldn't prevent Karkaroff's murder, that maybe they have become suspicious of him. Ron had stated flatly that that put Snape in a whole crap load of trouble.

\* \* \*

The break had passed in a blur of post-holiday depression, conversations about current events late into the night, growing fears about the Ministry's inadequacy, and deepening worries about O.W.L.s. The exams looked a lot closer from this side of the school year...

Hermione, Ron, Harry, and Jade now sat in their first potions lesson of the new year, attempting to push all thoughts other than school from their minds. Professor Snape, having returned the night before, stood stiffly before them. He let his eyes, accented by dark circles, travel from one face to the next, randomly making comments at the Gryffindors as he waited for his students to pile in.

"I trust you had a bit of measuring practice over the holidays, Ms. Brown," he said slowly. "And you Mr. Longbottom...perhaps for Christmas you got some sense? Or maybe a little logic, even?" Both Lavender and Neville ducked their heads avoiding their Potions Master's unyielding stare. On the Slytherin side of the classroom, Malfoy and his goons were having a guffaw. Harry glared at him as he pulled out a roll of parchment, thinking that Malfoy most likely knew quite well what had happen to Karkaroff...his father probably helped.

"I've run out of patience," Snape said in a low, dull voice, shortly after the bell had rung, signaling the beginning of class. "And you, have run nearly out of time." He paced about the room as he spoke, arms crossed, staring down his hook of a nose at the grim faces around him. "I think the growing anxiety in the pit of your stomach is a far better reminder of your quick-approaching Ordinary Wizarding Level exams than I can ever be."

"Does he not live with himself?" Ron hissed to Harry bewilderedly.

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley," Snape stated flatly, sending all color running from Ron's face as Harry quickly wiped the grin from his. "Five points from Gryffindor. Just out to make my day, aren't you?" From across the room, Malfoy smirked satisfactorily at them. Snape gave them one last revolted glare and continued.

"Today I will separate you all into groups of two. In these groups, you will assess each other's abilities by taking turns doing portions of the same potion. If your partner, for example Potter here, couldn't remember what the bezoar stones are for in your Hives Draught antidote, your grade will be sorely affected. You will share one standard number two cauldron with your partner, and pray that he or she or perhaps yourself knows what to do. Ms. Parkinson? You can be partners with Ms. Patil..."

Jade ended up being partnered with Neville who looked positively ill and seemed ready to say good-bye to the cruel world by ladling himself to death. Ron (to his very misfortune) was partnered up with Dean, Harry with Goyle, and Hermione (God rest her soul) with Malfoy. The fallen look on Malfoy's face practically screamed that putting him with Hermione was an outright insult. The assigned potions were handed out and Snape returned to his desk in the billowing clouds of his cape, announcing that the potions would be tested at the end of the period. It was pass or fail.

"Well, at least I'll pass," Draco drawled distastefully at Hermione, looking as if that was hardly a consolation for being forced to have her as company. "With you knowing everything and all". Hermione grinned rather maliciously and threw opened her book so violently Harry could have sworn he heard the binding rip from several desks away.

"I know I know everything, Malfoy," she replied sweetly through her smile. "So stop giving me a hard time about it, you foul little boy." Jade snickered and winked at Hermione from a desk behind, and Ron and Harry turned to look at her in befuddled surprise. A strange purple color was rising in Malfoy's pale cheeks. He was about to make a really inappropriate retort when Snape's eyes trailed up from his pile of parchments.

"I hope everyone is starting," he announced softly. "I wouldn't want any groups to not finish by the end of class."

Harry sighed and turned to his partner, the ever-enrapturing Gregory Goyle.

"Do you want to go first, or shall I?" he asked flatly looking down at their assigned potion. Enlarging solution...speaking of large, Harry never noticed how truly large Malfoy's Neanderthal henchman had grown, but it was all too clear sitting next to the boulder-sized boy. Unsurprisingly, Goyle had become the first boy of the fifth year to grow a unibrow. It looked like one large, brown caterpillar crinkling along his forehead as he struggled to remember how books worked. Ah, yes, Harry thought watching Goyle slowly flip open the cover, now all he has to do is learn how to turn the pages.

Harry didn't know how, but it must have been by the divine mercy of God that he and Goyle's enlarging solution had turned the desired orange, after Goyle hastily finished the last step. He sighed and looked up to see that Ron and Dean were done also. Dean was too busy attempting to engage Ron in conversation to notice Ron had transfigured his shoes into hideous dragon-hide boots, in an eye-hurting shade of fuchsia. Harry caught Ron's eye and attempted to look disapproving, but in the end Harry gave in and they sniggered causing Dean to raise his eyebrows at them. It felt good to laugh with Ron again. None of the Weasleys, he, Hermione, or Jade had laughed since Mr. Weasley's award ceremony. Hermione and Malfoy had completed their concoction ages ago and were now sitting as far away as possible from each other. The only ones still frantically working were Jade and Neville. Apparently, their potion had to be re-done several times due to Neville's prowess at messing up. They huddled together around their cauldron, Neville glancing nervously up at Snape who was staring at an hourglass, where the grains of sand were quickly running out.

"Just slice the Mandrakes now," Jade said patiently, not even acknowledging Snape or the rest of the classroom. "No wait! Don't add them—!"

An explosion sent Hermione and Draco flying off their seats (which were in front of Jade and Neville's) while a cloud of smoke quickly engulfed the classroom.

"Jade, Neville!" Harry and Ron cried out simultaneously pushing their way through the smoke and debris to their friends. They were pushed aside as Snape quickly made his way past them. Harry stared worriedly, praying that neither was hurt seriously. The smoke was beginning to dissipate now that Parvati and Lavender had opened the door and air vents. The room was utterly silent. Malfoy and Hermione were still on the ground staring bewilderedly through the cloudy room. Harry glanced at Ron who looked back at him wide eyed, and swallowed. Please, he thought, please let it be nothing serious...

A burst of laughter caught everyone in the room by surprise. Everything became visible as Snape muttered a spell, clearing the smoke and unveiling a melted and steaming mess that used to be a standard number two cauldron and two soot-covered people. Jade was doubled over laughing, pointing at Neville with his singed eyebrows and drop-jawed expression. He took one look at her and joined in, seeing that she looked extremely ridiculous with much of her hair scorched and smoking. The entire class was staring at them as if they were crazy. Snape was standing between the two with a look of utter contempt on his face, a vein throbbing across his forehead.

"I trust this atrocity was your fault, Mr. Longbottom," he whispered dangerously.

"Come on, Professor," Jade said grinning widely. Harry nearly fell over...no one in their right mind would ever tell Snape to "come" anywhere.

"It was just an accident," she insisted pulling at the mess that was her hair.

"An *accident!*" Malfoy suddenly cried out finally getting to his feet. "You nearly killed me!"

"If only we were that lucky," Hermione muttered.

"Twenty points from Gryffindor," Snape said sharply silencing any further comments instantaneously. "That's for your lack of sense, Mr. Longbottom." Jade's eyebrows (whatever was left of them) rose so that they nearly disappeared into her hairline.

“He didn’t mean to—,”

“And why didn’t you warn him that adding Mandrake too early would cause an explosive reaction?” Snape said, cutting her off.

“I thought—”

“On the contrary, I don’t think you did.”

“That’s not fair!”

“Forty points from Gryffindor,” he said simply returning to his desk. “For your lack of judgment.” Jade’s jaw dropped.

“But I’m not even *in* Gryffindor!” she exclaimed angrily.

“It doesn’t matter,” Snape replied, not even bothering to face her. “I see it is punishment for you to be the cause of that huge loss of points for your friends.”

“But—,” Jade started to retort but was once again cut off, this time by the bell. As was the case the first day she had spoken, the entire class seemed deaf to it, and stood watching the scene before them. Even the Slytherin’s seemed spellbound.

“Another word,” Snape replied taking his seat, “and I will take away more points. Mr. Longbottom and yourself will stay after to clean your mess. Everyone else may leave...unless they want a zero for the day.” That did it. Most of the class departed quickly through the doors, leaving just Harry, Ron, Hermione, Jade, and Neville.

“That includes you, Potter,” Snape said without looking up from his desk where he was writing something. “I don’t think Weasley could afford an ‘F’, and getting a zero would traumatize Ms. Granger.” Harry was about to say something but Jade caught his eye and shook her head.

“You’d better go,” Neville said quietly as he passed them on his way to retrieve some scrub brushes. Hermione pulled both Ron and Harry from the room, but not before Harry shot one more hateful glare at Snape and noticed that the Potions Master’s hands were shaking.

\* \* \*

“I could kill him,” Jade stated heatedly for the millionth time the next morning. Snape had sparked true anger in her for the first time that she could remember...and it seemed that she was refusing to take it well. Her face was flushed, but at least her hair and eyebrows were back to normal.

“You’re just angry,” Hermione said.

“I’m so *angry* I could kill him,” Jade cried out. Harry didn’t know why, but Jade’s anger at Snape was a little unsettling. He hadn’t shared with them that he had seen fear in the Potion Master’s shaking hands...maybe a fear of her.

“Are you going to eat that?” Jade asked him, still looking in a bit of a foul mood.

“What?”

“Your bacon...are you going to eat it?” she repeated than nudged Ron. “The Bottomless Pit here just finished off the platter.”

“You snooze you loose,” Ron replied. Harry handed over the several strips on his plate and caught Hermione’s eye. He shrugged and grinned as if he weren’t troubled by anything more than a temporary moment of stupidity.

“When’s Hagrid due back?” Hermione asked him, as if the question was to make sure he was back to the world of reality.

“He said probably by the end of this week,” he answered. He looked over at Jade who was now devouring his helping of bacon.

“But now I truly understand you, Ron,” she said sympathetically, wiping her fingers. “I could see why you’d want to kill Percy... could you kill Snape while you’re at it?” Harry groaned, hoping that she wouldn’t burst into another bout of complaints about Snape. None of the Gryffindors held it against her or Neville for loosing so many points for Gryffindor...they knew Snape did it simply out of spite. But she took it personally, and truthfully, Harry thought she had every right too. Snape had something against her...but what, and why?

His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of Professor McGonagall who was passing out a notice. She handed Neville one, who went instantly pale by the sight of it.

“Oh no,” he groaned, looking over at Harry. She handed all the fifth years the notice, but when she got to Harry, she also handed him a letter.

“If you would answer promptly, Potter,” she said the corners of her mouth moving slightly, the only evidence of a smile. He opened it to find a request from Madam Hooch.

*Dear Mr. Potter,*

*Flying lessons are resuming now that you have reached your fifth year...however I highly doubt that you are in any need of them. That is not the case with many of your classmates who lack practice and expertise in flying, and will need the lessons to receive their Certification for Broomstick Use this April. I would like to request you as an assistant in my double Flying class with Ravenclaw and Gryffindor.*

*Sincerely,*

*Madam Hooch*

“Oh no,” Hermione moaned, managing to look slightly more pained than Neville. She held the notice at arm’s length as if it were dangerous. She hadn’t touched a broom since their first year, and even then, she had managed to never leave the ground.

“Well, we’ve got to get our certificates if we ever want to use a broom for travel,” Ron said matter-of-factly, raising an eyebrow. Of course, he wasn’t half bad at flying, thought Harry who had played quidditch with him before at the Burrow. In fact, he wondered why Ron didn’t try out for keeper at the beginning of the year.

“Don’t worry, Hermione,” Harry said reassuringly. “You’ll fly fine.”

“Tell me that when I wake up in the infirmary,” she replied.

“I’ll probably be your ward mate,” Jade said smiling reassuringly at Hermione, before casting a glance at Harry. “What’s the letter for?”

“Madam Hooch asked me to help her during Flying lessons,” he said grinning apologetically at Hermione.

“See Hermione?” Ron added helpfully. “Harry’ll help you.”

“Hey,” Jade said now reading the second half of the notice the others had failed to see. “That’s interesting...Discover the Art of Healing. It says it’s a career course offered to fifth years and up who are interested in magical medicine—”

“Extra course?” Ron muttered. “Count me out.” Hermione however had brightened immensely.

“Oh, that really sounds fascinating!”

“Sign ups are tonight before dinner, space is limited,” Jade read on, before glancing up excitedly at her three friends.

“There’s no way I can pull an extra course before the O.W.Ls,” Harry stated outright. “I’ve got practice too.”

"But it's not really a course," Hermione said skimming her own notice. "It's more of a seminar. One class and one outing to St. Mungo's Hospital..."

"An extra class?" Ron asked looking revolted. "Never would I voluntarily take an extra class."

"There are no assignments and your lessons are fully excused for the two days that you're in the program," Hermione completed.

"Where do I sign up?" Ron asked calmly.

\* \* \*

After the last class of the day (History of Magic a.k.a. The Comatose Lesson), Harry hurried down to the pitch for a spur of the moment, afternoon quidditch practice. Angelina had insisted that everyone's skills were rusty from not being worked on for three weeks. She was getting nervous about their match against Ravenclaw in March...she heard Cho had gotten a Nimbus 2001 for Christmas. On top of that, Seamus was still extremely skittish in the air ever since his nasty fall in November. Whenever the Weasley's sent a bludger his way during practice, he flew off the pitch, leaving the goals completely uncovered.

"It's a bludger, Finnigan!" Fred yelled after him. "Come back, I'll protect you!" Harry grimaced as he watched Angelina mentally fling herself off a cliff.

After practice, he showered and completed a few lessons in his various O.W.L study packets with the help of Hermione and Jade. Afterward, they made for the Great Hall early to sign up for the Art of Healing course, Dean deciding to join them.

"That Art of Healing thing sounds really cool," Ginny said to Jade. "I wish I was a fifth year."

"I'd love to take some more courses like this," Dean said to Hermione as Ron attempted using the *lumos* spell to burn a hole through his head..

"Me too," she agreed. "It'd be awfully informative." When they reached the Entrance Hall, Ginny left them and they joined the line that had formed in front of the sign-up sheet.

It was Ron that had finally convinced Harry into signing up for the two-day program. Who would turn away two homework free days with your best friends? Harry supposed it didn't matter that he wasn't remotely interested...the course was designed to "explore" possible careers, not be interested in them. They joined the line along with Katie Bell and Alicia Spinnett, several seventh year Gryffindors they didn't know, Justin Finch-Fletchy, Hannah Abbott, and to their dismay, Malfoy and a clutch of Slytherins. He sneered at them from his circle of friends. Ron looked at Harry and he could tell they both were thinking about backing out...until, that is, a voice caught Harry's attention.

"All right, Harry?" Cho Chang asked walking up to them, smiling. "Hi guys." She was accompanied by one of her sixth year friends and Mandy Brocklehurst.

"Hi there, Ron," Mandy said sweetly, engaging him in a conversation about the holidays. Hermione suddenly looked as if she couldn't hear a word Dean was saying, as she cast a distasteful look at them.

"Did you enjoy the holidays, Jade?" Cho asked.

"Absolutely," she replied trying in vain to keep her face straight, standing next to a rather bewitched Harry. "Harry told me you got yourself a Nimbus 2001 for Christmas."

"Sure did," Cho returned grinning. "It may not be a Firebolt, but you better watch your back, Harry." He stared at her, speechless. Jade glanced up at him and "inconspicuously" stamped on his foot.

"Ouch! I mean, yeah," Harry said trying to glare at Jade and grin at Cho at the same time. "I feel sorry for all those seeker's you'll be leaving in the dust." A brilliant blush appeared on Cho's pretty face, as a smile graced her lips. Jade attempted to refrain from laughing at Harry by starting a conversation with the sixth year girl accompanying his crush.

"I didn't know you were interested in Magical Medicine," Cho said to Harry.

“Oh,” he managed, struggling to reply. Just reply, he said to himself, which would be simple enough if his stomach wasn’t threatening to flip itself inside out or his brain wasn’t chanting “lie, lie, lie...” in his skull.

“Yeah,” he blurted out. “I really don’t hate it that much.” Darn it. Now his brain was chanting, “shoot yourself, shoot yourself...”

“Me too,” Cho laughed, tucking a bit of her lustrous, black hair behind her ear. “I’m especially interested in getting out of lessons for two days.” She was so pretty, and really fun to talk to (If he ever managed it). She liked quidditch and was bloody good at it as well; she was real competition for him. Funny, Harry thought, her face is getting all splotchy. Oh, forgot to breathe. Passing out was not a way to impress a girl. But did he ever stand a chance with her? Especially after last year...after what happened to Cedric?

His thoughts were cut short when he realized he was standing in front of the sign-up sheet, Ron, Hermione, and Jade had just signed seconds before. With a shaky hand he printed his name, said good-bye (with some difficulty) to Cho and followed his friends into the Great Hall. Amazingly, Hermione and Ron managed to get themselves into a bickering match seconds from fisticuffs as they argued over something too trivial for Harry’s full attention. He looked back at Cho and waved.

“You really like her,” Jade said smiling watching Hermione and Ron in front of them.

“Well, she’s nice,” Harry, said, attempting to keep his voice in its normal octave. She rolled her eyes at him and shook her head knowingly. Harry grinned sheepishly back.

“Yeah, I really like her.”

“The Promenade isn’t to far from now,” she said winking, before proceeding to break up Ron and Hermione before war was declared. They chose seats several chairs down from the Weasley twins and across from Dean, Seamus, and Neville. Dumbledore, and the traveling Hagrid were not at the High Table.

Dinner was filled with discussions about the upcoming Quidditch matches and dread of fast approaching O.W.L.s. It was crowned by the marvelous sweets and pastries that appeared after the main courses vanished. Harry picked up a large piece of toffee and laughed at Ron who was taking bets on how many bon bons he could fit in his mouth. Hermione rolled her eyes and Harry nudged her, insisting she lighten up. However, just as everyone was starting to enjoy their treats (Ron with 12 bon bons miraculously stuffed in his mouth), random puffs of smoke went up all along the table. Alicia Spinnet had burst into canary yellow feathers, while Dean acquired massive tusk that sent him face first into the table. Harry choked as his tongue inflated and burst from his mouth looking like a pink, beached whale. Ron’s chair had crumbled beneath him as his bum expanded to an extraordinary size. Hermione and Jade took one look and dropped the tarts they were holding.

“Not again,” Ron muttered flatly. “FRED, GEORGE!” His yell was drowned out by a sudden explosion of laughter from the unaffected people at their table and the other houses. In an instant everyone unfortunate enough to come by a Weasley Wizard Wheeze, had their tusks vanished, tongues deflated, feathers molted, and rear-ends shrunken. Humor would never die as long as the Weasley twins were around. The twins were rolling around laughing, Ginny shaking her head at them, when McGongall walked over and placed a firm hawk-like claw on each of their shoulders.

“Come with me,” she said sternly, silencing their guffaw. They were lead away, bowing to the laughing masses as they left. Ron stood up and Harry tried out his jaw. Jade sniggered.

“Oh think that’s funny?” Ron asked turning in circles trying to look at his rear. “I had twelve of those blasted bon bons...I’m going to have stretch marks!”

“I was wondering when the pranks would start up again,” Hermione said thoughtfully as Dean tapped his teeth, making sure they were the size they were supposed to be.

“How in god’s name did they pull that one off?” Harry asked amused.

"Pure, bloody, genius—," Ron replied before cutting himself off as his gaze fell on the entrance. "Percy?" he muttered squinting at the figure in the doorway. Ginny who was just getting up to leave, stopped and stared at her brother.

"Huh?" she asked Ron curiously.

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked turning to get a look at the entrance himself. Sure enough, Percy Weasley was there, looking as if he was just caught picking his nose. He ducked out of sight when he had caught his brother's eye.

"What in the bloody hell is he doing here?" Ron hissed and marched over the splintered pieces that were the remains of his chair, followed closely by Harry, Hermione, Jade, and Ginny. They burst into the Entrance Hall to find Percy hurrying up the stairs, his Ministry robes fluttering weakly around him.

"Percy!" Ron exclaimed. "What are you doing?" The tall form that was climbing the stairs stiffened and slowly turned around.

"Hello Ron, Ginny," he said swallowing, and slowly making his way down to them. "Fancy seeing you all here."

"WE BLOODY GO TO SCHOOL HERE!" Ron shouted, his face flushing. Hermione put a hand on his shoulder and pulled him slightly away from his brother. Harry stepped a little in front of Ron to prevent him from launching himself at Percy.

"Why are you here, Perce?" Ginny asked quietly. His horn-rimmed glasses flashed as he looked down at her.

"Business, Ginny," he started to say but stopped as his eyes trailed over to Jade. He shuddered and looked away. "Regarding some important decisions." However subtle it was, Harry saw the way Percy had looked at Jade...the way he had said *business* and linked it to her. Ginny looked up her brother, and shook her head accusingly at him, before brushing past so violently, he was knocked off his feet. Harry narrowed his eyes at the boy who was barely older than him self, sprawled on the last few steps of the stairs.

"What's the *business*, Percy?" he asked so dangerously, it surprised him. "What does Logan Price want?"

"Percy!" Fred exclaimed surprised "Merlin's beard, what the hell are you doing here?" He had just walked into the Entrance Hall from a side chamber, followed closely by his twin and McGonagall. The stern, old, woman stopped short when she saw him.

"Professor," Percy said stiffly nodding his head. McGonagall looked in no mood for formalities and instead brushed past him.

"Are they still conferencing?" she called to him half way up the stairs. Percy nodded solemnly, making efforts to avoid eye contact with any of his brothers, Harry, Hermione, or Jade. Remus Lupin stopped the old headmistress at the top of the stairs. An older, thick-necked gentleman in charcoal gray robes accompanied him, a large badge decorating his left breast. They stood at the top of the stairs as if in conversation, but only little flutters of syllables made their way down to the group of surprised students below. Suddenly the squared shoulders of McGonagall hunched forward, aging her like no trouble-making student has never been capable of. She stiffly straightened and made her way back down the stairs looking at the wide-eyed figure of Jade.

"Come along, Jade," she said quietly upon reaching them. Ron's fists, which had been balled since he had seen Percy, unclenched, as Hermione's grip on his shoulder tightened. Harry's breath was caught in his throat. What was going on? Fred and George each took a hold of Percy's arms and pulled him up from the ground.

"We need to talk," they said in unison. Percy shook his head, and straightened his robes.

"I'm on business," he replied curtly.

"We're your business," George stated and they pulled him to a dark corner of the Hall seating him down on a carved bench where they wouldn't be noticed or interrupted when the rest of the diners in the Great Hall left.

"Come along," McGonagall repeated and her eyes glistened a bit. Jade's face was slack, like a stage curtain whose form had sagged after the ropes that held it up had long snapped.

"What's going on?" she asked furrowing her brow.

"Professor Dumbledore needs to see you," she insisted.

"Professor—," Hermione said shaking her head, confused.

"You all need to go to your common room," McGonagall interrupted. Jade turned to look at them before following the headmistress up the stairs. Harry took a deep breath and tore after them, Ron, and Hermione behind him.

"No!" he stated firmly. "Not until I know what's going on." McGonagall looked as if she were going to protest, but Lupin shook his head. The man in the charcoal gray robes looked grimly at them. The badge on his robes read, "St. Mungo's Hospital—Mental Functions Specialist."

"Let them," Lupin said. "They're in this too."

They followed the troupe of adults and Jade in silence to the familiar landing where the massive stone gargoyle stood watch. As they approached it, it got up and stepped aside, as a man in an overcoat burst from the entrance it concealed.

"Don't overexaggerate the situation to her," he was saying as he faced the tall figure of Albus Dumbledore. "It wouldn't be good for her at all."

"You've already made sure of that," Dumbedore replied, pulling himself up to his full height. It was the first time Harry had noticed that the Headmaster wasn't just tall...he gave the impression that his height was merely a small glimpse of his power. Logan Price turned, his black overcoat swishing with his movements. His sharp and handsome face softened as he saw Jade in the approaching group.

"Dr. McCourt," he said to the thick-necked man in the St. Mungo's robes.

"I'm all prepared," he answered nodding his head.

"You requested to speak with her first," Price said solemnly, turning his attention to Dumbledore. The Headmaster took a moment to consider the words, his blue eyes fierce.

"Jade, will you come to my office for a bit?" Dumbledore said gently, turning to her, suddenly acting as if Price was not there.

"Professor, what's going on?" Harry said quietly, now looking with increasing suspicion at Dr. McCourt and Price. Dumbledore merely nodded to him, Ron, and Hermione, before leading Jade, Lupin, and McGonagall to his office. Price stared at the gargoyle as it moved back into place.

"Will you have the carriage prepared, Doctor?" he said. "Then return up here promptly." The St. Mungo's doctor nodded and departed, avoiding Harry, Ron, and Hermione's accusing glares as the silence settled in on them. Ron cleared his throat, but otherwise they watched the Head of International Magical Relations wordlessly.

"So you are the famous Harry Potter," Price suddenly said not even taking his eyes off the stone creature concealing Dumbledore's office. Harry didn't say anything; Price knew the answer.

"It must be hard for you," the man continued in a voice that was distant, barely even audible, and Harry had to strain to hear the words at all. "In fact, I know it is. It was powerful magic that killed my parents too." At long last, the man turned his head, revealing his beautiful gray eyes, brimming with tears.

"And in the end we chase dreams for answers," he finished. A cold chill crept up the length of Harry's spine. Those were his exact fears put into words, but how they related to Jade, he didn't know.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked cautiously. Price turned away and drew himself tall again, blinking rapidly to clear his eyes. He didn't answer, just stood there, waiting for the gargoyle to jump aside again.

They stood there for nearly a quarter of an hour, Harry, Hermione, and Ron still too completely confused to say anything. Dr. McCourt returned just as the entrance was revealed and Price proceeded forth. Before the gargoyle could step back into place, Harry, Ron, and Hermione leaped onto the ascending staircase, nearly toppling onto each other. Price and McCourt looked at them sympathetically as the three struggled to regain their balance.

"What are you doing?" Price asked weakly. It seemed to be the question of the night. By then, they reached the office door, and before either the doctor or the Ministry wizard could prevent it, Harry, Ron, and Hermione stumbled through after them. Jade sat in a chair staring off into space, shaking her head slowly from side to side. Lupin was knelt beside her chair, saying something quietly to her, while McGonagall and Dumbledore stood awaiting Price and McCourt. McGonagall looked as if she were going to object when she saw Harry, Hermione, and Ron, but Dumbledore did not look remotely surprised that they had come.

"We're ready to go," Price said stepping deeper in the beautiful, circular room.

"This is not the way," Dumbledore said. "Mr. Price, she's improving, at a miraculous speed. Taking her away now could set her back into her condition...maybe so far away no one can reach her." Harry's brows knitted, and beside him, Hermione was shaking her head in disbelief.

"You know that isn't the only reason," Price said stepping towards McGonagall and the Headmaster. His eyes fell onto the girl in the chair beside him. "The issue went through Minister Fudge's Board of Committees and it has been decided that boarding an unauthorized student with possible mental ailment is both unacceptable and risky. If she could be proven to have a family...that would show that she wasn't..." Price paused uncomfortably and shook his head before continuing. "It would show who she is, her history. These are all reasons as to why we must take her...not to mention my own." And with that, the haunting sadness returned to the seemingly cold young man as he stood there before Dumbledore. Jade looked up at him, but quickly glanced away. Dumbledore was silent, staring at Price as if examining him. Finally, he spoke, but not Price, to Jade.

"I promise we will get you back," the old man said, the twinkling in his eye sparkling with extra effort to reassure her.

"You won't be able to," she replied simply. The words were deeply uprooting, so that even Dumbledore blinked in surprise.

"You can't take her," Harry said stepping between Price and Jade's chair, shaking with disbelief. "Jade can't be dangerous or crazy or whatever you think! Just because we don't know her past!"

"I promised I wouldn't let that happen," Dumbledore said to Harry before Price could reply. "And I will hold true to it. She will be back."

"This is so wrong!" Hermione exclaimed, surprising her self by her assertiveness. "You're taking her away under ridiculous assumptions!"

"And what are you going to do with her? Put her in Mungo's?" Ron spat stepping in front of Price. Dumbledore pulled him back with his incredible hidden strength.

"It's a matter children couldn't understand," Price said as Dr. McCourt knelt in front of her.

"I sure as bloody hell understand!" Harry shouted, surprising everyone in the room.

"That's enough, Harry," Dumbledore said firmly. Harry pressed his lips together angrily, but knew Dumbledore would get Jade back...even though a shred of doubt drifted in his head. It was what she had said...*you won't be able too...* it was so very final. It wasn't fair, Harry thought. Voldemort took away his family, the Ministry took away his credibility, and now this man was going to take away his friend. Jade deserved a chance to be who she was.

"It's time to go, St. Mungo's is expecting us," Price said to McCourt not looking the least bit angered by Harry's outburst. The doctor nodded gravely and turned his attention to Jade who was looking up at Dumbledore.

"Now lass," McCourt said gently in a rolling Scottish accent. "Its time to go now. My name is Sam, I'm a doctor and I'm going to take care of you—,"

"No need to," she stated firmly. She looked over and glanced at her three friends. "I'm not leaving."

"It's for the best," McCourt started.

"The Ministry and yourself don't know what's best for me," she replied, her voice rising. McCourt looked to Price who nodded. The doctor pulled a wand from his sleeve.

"What do you think you're doing?" Lupin snapped grabbing his wand hand with the speed of an expert defense dueler.

"Just a sedation spell," the older man said gently. "I don't want her to hurt herself, now."

"No, don't," Jade said, eyes wide as she stood and backed away. She turned to glance at Harry, Ron, and Hermione who looked inches from throwing themselves on the old, thick-necked, doctor.

"*Sedatus*," McCourt said hitting her with the spell. Jade stopped, her body slackened. Her eyelids half-shut, as a calm and very dazed expression clouded her eyes. McGonagall muffled a soft cry.

"I won't let her stay there," Dumbledore said suddenly angry. And even though Harry was brimming with anger at the injustice of it all, he understood what the Headmaster was doing. He could not afford to cut ties completely with the Ministry and its wizards...not now when the future rested on his leadership. He was still very influential, and that was the power he was going to use to get Jade back. Ron moved to stand beside Harry as Dumbledore released his shoulder.

"You do what you can," Price said sounding almost as if he truly wanted Dumbledore to get her back. "We're expected, Dr. McCourt." With disgust and loathing written on her face, McGonagall led Price and the doctor, who was guiding Jade forward by the hand, out the door. Harry was shaking now. Without giving it a second thought he raced after them, Ron, and Hermione at his heels. Lupin and Dumbledore remained in the circular office, not bothering to stop them.

"You take her, and you ruin a life!" Harry shouted heatedly when he spotted the four figures making their way towards the Great Staircase.

"There must be another way," Hermione insisted when she reached Price, clutching a stitch in her side. "I'm sure if you could get the committee to give us just a little more time—,"

"There is nothing that you could do about judicial decisions, Miss," Price said. "Professor Dumbledore has placed you all in danger too long. The Ministry has judged properly."

"Oh, like with that Voldemort thing," Ron shot scathingly. It was enough to make Price's gallant trot clumsily stumble for a moment.

"Outwitted by a fifteen year old boy, Mr. Price," McGonagall hissed angrily. "Remember to tell the committee they look like fools even in the eyes of school children."

Harry barely heard any of this. He was walking beside Jade who's blank expression and liquid movements seemed hauntingly *déjà vu* to him. She moved as if she were walking through water, one arm held by the St. Mungo's doctor.

"We'll get you back," he whispered to her. "They're wrong, you do belong here." Jade's eyes flickered to him, but he wondered if she even saw him.

"You know where you belong," Harry continued to mutter to her. "I think you were meant to be here. We'll get you back, I promise."

McCourt pulled Jade further along as they neared the Great Staircase, Ron and Hermione continuing their heated arguments with Price. McCourt's eyes were cheerless as he looked apologetically at the three friends, who were fighting in vain to keep their companion. As they descended the stairs, Price spotted Percy over Hermione's head and called him over. Percy straightened his horn-rimmed glasses and detached himself from his brothers. Fred and George looked from their departing brother to the strange scene before them.

"I can't believe you, Perce," Fred spat as the realization hit him; Percy was with the men pulling Jade towards the front doors. "God, you came here to take Jade away?" George had hurried forward and sidestepped his lanky brother.

"I can't believe you're doing this!" he exclaimed. "Even after what you know about her!" Percy held his head a little higher and proceeded around his brother without another glance.

"The Ministry is wrong," McGonagall hissed to Price as he pulled open the doors revealing a carriage just outside the entrance. Harry rushed forward, and McGonagall tried to hold him back, but her fingers missed his robes by millimeters.

"The Ministry is wrong!" he bellowed. "She belongs here! She's not bloody dangerous!"

Percy nearly tripped over Jade who had stopped jerkily, her head turning towards Harry's voice for the second time, but now the clouds had lifted from her eyes. She looked directly at him and her friends, as if her entire existence depended on it.

"Come on, doctor," Price said, holding the doors open. A winter chill found its way in and swept across all their faces. Jade's face was no longer slack, but set, with eyes narrowed and lips pursed.

"The spell," McCourt said slightly in awe as he examined her. "It's worn off...but how?"

"Mr. Weasley," Price said indicating McCourt. "Go help him, please." Percy obliged and made his way over.

As Percy reached for Jade's other hand, she ripped her arm from McCourt's grasp.

"I'm not going anywhere," she said with clarity ringing clearly in her voice. "I belong here with them." She made a move towards her group of friends and McGonagall, but Price had left his station at the door and snaked an arm around her waist lifting her off the ground.

"YOU CAN'T HIDE ME IN ST. MUNGO'S!" Jade yelled fighting tooth and nail to extract herself from Price, whose top hat had tumbled to the floor, his once neat hair matted with sweat as he struggled to hold the thrashing girl. She managed a solid upper cut to Percy's jaw as he attempted to help his superior, sending him flying. "Help me, doctor," Price called over his shoulder to McCourt who was still looking at the girl in awe.

"Get your blasted hands off me!" Jade grunted twisting her body round.

"Stop!" The Headmaster's roaring demand rang through the hall freezing the scene before him. He and Lupin had appeared at the top of the stairs, several clutches of parchments in their hands. Harry whirled around to face him. Dumbledore stood tall and furious Lupin beside him with calm triumph on his face.

"Jade Cordonnier will not be going anywhere tonight," Dumbledore announced. Harry's breath came out in a slow hiss as Ron and Hermione looked from Jade to the Headmaster in utter confusion.

"What?" Price asked, his arms loosening their hold on his charge, allowing her to fall away with mouth ajar.

"This just arrived," he said, indicating the parchments in his hand. "We've found Jade's parents."

## 15. Finally With an Identity

It had gone deafeningly quiet. If the ears strained enough, a soft fluttering of parchments could be made out like the swishing robes of ghosts, a sound long dead. Logan Price stood fixed to the spot by the weight of the surprising news. A few inches away stood Jade, her face plainly written with shock. Percy and Dr. McCourt were supporting each other, looking from the parchments in the hands of the Headmaster and the face Lupin, to the curious girl who had just forced her way out of a sedation charm moments before. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were so completely flabbergasted all they could do was stare at the tall form of Dumbledore. Looking as if their legs would give out, the Weasley twins gawked at their brother. Harry's mind was reeling. What did Dumbledore call Jade? He thought confusedly.

"Excuse me?" Price asked with bewilderment evident in his voice as it rung eerily through the heavy air of the Entrance Hall. The faintest smile flickered onto Dumbledore's lips, before vanishing into the lines of his face, which was now as set as stone.

"Jade Cordonnier will be going no where tonight, Mr. Price," Dumbledore repeated slowly, making his way gracefully down the stairs. Lupin was beside him. "We have been fortunate enough to find her family." A sudden yelp of the utmost triumph escaped Professor McGonagall as she tried to force down her glee. If possible, Jade's jaw dropped even further. Logan Price stiffly stood up straight, shaking his head unbelievingly.

"She can't be—,"

"Jade Cordonnier," Dumbledore read off the papers. "Born the 31st of November in London fifteen years ago, daughter to Marius and Jacqueline Cordonnier. She also has citizenship in both Britain and France. Current residence is near the French Alps, but her parents are temporarily residing in Bulgaria—,"

"Death Eaters were last located there!" Price burst out.

"Where they were conducting historic research on Ancient wizards for the past two years when they received news of her disappearance." Price's face had been drained of color and Harry feared that the man would drop dead on the spot. Percy, perhaps thinking that he may be a pillar of strength, stepped forward shakily. He was more like a pillar of jell-o.

"Headmaster," he managed with a waver in his voice. "If indeed these people are Jade's parents, why didn't the Ministry have a missing person's report from them? Why did it take so long to locate them?"

"Hard to remember anything if you *can't*," Ron lashed out at his brother.

"That was but one of our set backs in locating her family," Dumbledore continued before Ron or his twin brothers could further attack Percy. "They were in Bulgaria for one, which meant any missing persons file would have to go through the Bulgarian Ministry before it could be sent anywhere. On top of that, Jade's whereabouts were thought to be in France, where she was due to enroll at Beauxbatons for the year."

"Then how in god's name did she end up in the Forbidden Forrest?" Price burst out loudly stepping towards the Headmaster. "In bloody Great Britain?" Dumbledore simply smiled as Lupin rifled calmly through some of the files in his hands.

"Jade's education for the past four years has been quiet an eccentric one," Remus said raising his eyes to look at Price. "She's been boarding in several schools around the world...two of the four, muggle. It was a program designed by her and her parents, which allowed her an education thoroughly liberal, encompassing many different environments. Jade wanted to be a researching historian like her parents, but she wished to study the relationship between muggles and wizards."

"That isn't an explanation," Price began but Dumbledore cut him off.

“She spent last year at the Rudyard Academy here in Britain,” the Headmaster said turning to look at Jade’s stunned face. “A very fine muggle academy by reputation. Anyway, her parents had arrived to spend the summer with her here, where she had made a handful of very close non-magical friends. At the beginning of September, her parents were due back to their research in Bulgaria, and Jade, school at Beauxbatons. They had arranged for her to leave by means of a muggle transportation called an “air plane” later that afternoon so that she may spend an additional few hours with her friends. The time between then and when she stumbled from the forest is still very much cloaked in mystery.”

“But the pendent,” Price muttered breathlessly. Harry was so utterly confused now. Price seemed completely off subject.

“Simply a way for abstract wand use,” Dumbledore replied plainly. “Her mother uses a ring, and her father prefers a walking stick. The pendent was passed down to her from her grandmother. A family quirk, you could call it.” At that Lupin grinned. Everyone lapsed into silence again now that the pieces of Jade’s personal puzzle were now coming together.

“Well since you won’t be escorting Jade to St. Mungo’s, why don’t we take a look at other business?” Dumbledore said warmly holding up the stack of parchment, the twinkle now absolutely brilliant in his pale blue eyes. “It’s a long trip to London, perhaps a nice cup of tea and a looking over of these files before you go, gentlemen?” Price straightened and Percy picked up the long fallen top hat and handed it to him. McCourt swallowed and glanced down at his wand as if questioning it silently how the sedation spell had worn off so quickly on the girl. Before anyone could move, a choking sob echoed through the hall.

Jade’s knee’s had given out and she sagged to the ground, tears streaming from her eyes. There was a strange look of wonderment on her face, as if crying was a whole new experience for her. Price, who had been completely stunned, now strode up to Jade in complete bewilderment. With shaking hands he reached out and touched her tear-streaked face, and examined his wet fingertips in awe, as if he couldn’t believe her ability to cry.

“Jade...” Harry muttered and walked over to her, Hermione following, fumbling for a tissue in her pocket. Percy, looking quite ashamed, shakily took a handkerchief from his breast pocket and made towards the kneeling girl, but Ron pushed him roughly out of the way as he passed. Jade was touching her face, examining the tears just as Price had done.

“Jade, it’s okay,” Harry said kneeling beside her, and placing a hand on her shaking shoulder where a faint pulse beat against his palm.

“You’re staying,” Hermione said, her own voice catching. Tears were welling up in her own eyes as she tried to persuade Jade to use the tissue.

“And Dumbledore’s found your parents,” Ron added slapping her on the back as Lupin made his way towards them. It was then Price spoke, still looking at the glistening tears on his fingertips.

“But she has to be it...” he was muttering. “She has to be...” Harry’s head snapped towards the man.

“What in the hell are you talking about?” he asked angrily, thinking that Price was completely nutters, wholly infuriated by him and the Ministry and what havoc they caused. Price’s eyes slowly moved from his hand, traveled over to Harry, before resting on Jade. As if his gaze had burned her, she jumped to her feet, knocking Ron back in the process. She brushed past Lupin and hurried up the stairs, her robes flying wildly behind her.

“Jade, wait!” Hermione called, brushing away her own tears. She dashed after her, Harry, and Ron at her heels.

“She’s no longer your problem, Mr. Price,” Harry could hear Dumbledore say as he ran alongside his friends. “Come to my office where we can look over the paperwork.”

They caught up to Jade in a deserted hallway lined with suits of armor. It was the same hallway where Peeves had pestered her months before.

"Come on, stop!" Ron called trying to catch his breath. Jade obliged several feet in front of them, her back turned so that they could see a shudder go through her body.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked with furrowed brow. "They can't take you now." She didn't turn around.

"Jade," Hermione said her voice shaking. "Please, talk to us." Jade lifted her hands and pressed them against her face, pulling them away violently to dry her cheeks. She turned to look at the three, cheeks red from where she rubbed them, eyes glistening. Slowly she began to walk towards them, and then she quickened her pace until she was running full speed. With a cry of utter resolve, happiness, and relief, she flung her arms around the necks of her three friends, and kissed each of them on the cheek. They stood in this many arm hug for several straight minutes, laughing carelessly, not caring about how ridiculous they must have looked.

"God," Jade said when she finally pulled away, a smile on her face. "They've found my parents, but all along you've been my family."

\* \* \*

They never entered the common room until late that night, as they had turned around and made for Dumbledore's office. They arrived just as Price, Percy Weasley, and the sympathetic Dr. McCourt stepped from behind the stone Gargoyle, followed by Lupin, McGonagall, and the Headmaster himself. Price was looking less than composed, even as the appearance of utter relief settled onto the St. Mungo's doctor's face. Percy was fidgeting slightly, avoiding any of their eyes, as he quickly brushed past. Ron aimed a kick at his shins, but any due injury was prevented by one sharp look from Hermione. Price paused before them, running a hand through his hair, which now stood on end, top hat clutched in one hand. His eyes fell on Jade and a sad smile flickered onto his face, not helping to soften the absolutely crushed look that seemed to blanket his features. He held out his hand shakily to her and instinctively she stepped backwards, trampling Harry's foot in the process.

"It's all right," Dumbledore said reassuringly to Jade. "No one will be taking you anywhere against your will." He added a wink, which seemed to spark courage back into her. Slowly, Jade reached forward and shook the young man's hand.

"I'm sorry for what happened tonight," Price said quietly looking her straight in the eyes. "But in the end you've found your family. I'll be honored to meet them during your reunion." They stood there silently, their gaze never breaking.

"I'm sorry that you didn't find what you were looking for," Jade replied firmly. Price's body shook and he pulled his hand away as if her words were an insult. Harry met the man's gaze for a split second before he looked away, swallowing nervously.

"You take care now," McCourt said to Jade, patting her on the shoulder. He looked at her friends, who stood beside her and nodded thoughtfully. "I reckon you're a lucky one, having friends that care so much about you." Jade nodded her agreement and flashed Harry, Ron, and Hermione a grateful smile. McGonagall cleared her throat and offered to show the men out.

"Come on now, Mr. Price," McCourt added. "We've got no more business here." Price moved forward and once again, Jade stepped back and tromped on Harry's foot. He grimaced and nearly toppled as Price's shoulder brushed his at the same time he grabbed Jade's shoulder to steady himself. Suddenly the pain that was radiating from his twice-trodden foot shot up through his body and burned for an instant along the fine line of the scar on his forehead.

"Ouch!" he grunted wincing, but before he could fully register the flicker of fire above his brow, it was gone, and he was left with only the throbbing pain in his foot.

"Sorry," Jade muttered sheepishly, turning to give him an apologetic smile. Harry could feel his face pale, and his hands grow cold as he released her shoulder. Did his scar just hurt?

"Are you okay?" she asked, turning around to look at him, noticing his horrified expression. "Harry?" Snapping out of it as he shook his head, he forced a grin onto his face.

"Now that you've flatten my foot, sure," he replied easily. The pain had been so fleeting; he began to wonder if he felt it at all. His hand instinctively reached up to touch the scar, but he seamlessly changed the move as if he meant to run his hand through his hair. No, he thought, it was nothing. It had been a long time since that characteristic mark had burned, and it seemed reasonable that Voldemort was nowhere near Hogwarts right then. Most likely he was in Bulgaria or somewhere close to there; wherever it was, it was far away from Hogwarts. Harry swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat and as the seconds passed, he was further convinced. It was merely the sensation of being stepped on twice and nearly toppled over in one go that sparked the imaginary pain.

They stood and watched as McGonagall led the three men away until Dumbledore spoke.

"I am assuming you would like to look at your history, Jade," he said warmly.

Lupin led them up to the office, and together they explored Jade's past. She had been schooled in Australia, Japan, America, and England, and as Dumbledore had announced before, studied both in wizarding schools and muggle academies.

"And look!" Hermione exclaimed. "You've played football! Dean would love that!" Ron scowled at her and muttered something undeterminable about Dean under his breath.

"But it looks like you nearly failed biology last year," Harry muttered earning him a glare from Hermione.

"I wish I could remember it all," Jade murmured fingering a few pictures of her self. Her image flitted across their individual photographs, grinning and posing. "Well, except nearly failing."

"You will," Lupin said with a smile, handing her another pile of her past. "With time and the reunion with your parents, you will." At that, Jade's face brightened.

"When will I meet them?" she asked excitedly dropping the photos as she stood up. "Are they coming soon? Will they let me stay?" Dumbledore chuckled, as he reached to pick up one of the fallen pictures. As if the photo weighted several pounds, very weary heaviness settled upon him.

"As you all probably know with your connections with Sirius and Mr. Krum," he said soberly, "there has been a murder of a prominent man in Bulgaria. A perimeter of security has been privately erected by theirs, ours, and the surrounding countries' Ministries to keep watch for any further sign of Death Eaters."

"It has been hard to get any information out of or into Bulgaria," Lupin added pushing a hand through his peppered brown hair. "You're parents have filed for passports, but must go through several precautionary procedures before that is possible. Most likely it won't happen until May or June." Jade's face fell and she sat back down, picking up the fallen pictures.

"It's amazing there's so much effort to stop Voldemort when no one will believe he's returned," Harry said bitterly.

"A worry I wish you not trouble yourself with," Dumbledore said to Harry with benign eyes. "It is a sign that the Ministry may be opening up to other possibilities." Harry nodded in silent agreement, still bitter. Dumbledore's gaze traveled over his the maturing faces of his pupils, until it settled on Jade.

"You'll see your parents within a few months," he said to her. "And until then, there will be correspondence, and of course a wonderful year here...as your parents have given permission for you to stay. You will become an official student." Even Harry brightened with that prospect and for the next hour they talked over the parchments that held Jade's history. Dumbledore even magicked up some copies for her. It was after eleven when the Headmaster insisted they head for bed, and adding with a wink to not let Mr. Filch catch them, or it'd be his head. Lupin walked them part of the way, and departed towards the staff apartments, leaving them to their quiet and content conversations as they accompanied Jade back to the hospital wing.

\* \* \*

*"James, wait here," she insisted brushing the tangled mass of read hair from her face.*

"No, I'm fine." The young man said, wincing and brushing sweat from his brow, struggling to pull himself up the smooth surface of the stone cavern walls. "They couldn't send Moody on this one, could they?"

Harry watched the scene play out, the feeling of familiarity rushing over him. It had been a while since he had seen these images, but not long enough that he had forgotten them. He watched the young and energetic people, his parents, live their moment. He didn't bother to question why he was seeing this again, but rather reveled in it, as if he were afraid he would never get the chance to see this strange movie showcasing two people he desperately desired to know.

*"I love you, James Potter," Lily said softly over her shoulder.*

"Ditto, Lily Potter," James replied as she turned and began to climb the wall that led to the grotto.

\* \* \*

His hand reached out for the disappearing image of his parents as he awoke. Harry's eyes strained in the half darkness of the dormitory, searching the shadows and folds of velvet curtain for one more glimpse of the dream. Why had it returned? He questioned his brain, brows knitted with utmost confusion. Why after all this time? It was all he could do, because nothing changed the fact that the episode of dreams were back in detail, as if reminding him of something.

\* \* \*

The next few days passed as normally as possible at Hogwarts, with Dumbledore announcing Jade's news and official student status to the entire school. There was even a belated birthday party for her in the Gryffindor common room, food and décor courtesy of the Weasley twins. By the end of the week, as promised, Hagrid returned. The past few classes with their substitute Creatures instructor, Professor Grubbily-Plank had been uneventful, and the students almost wished for a random explosion from the silk morders. However, true to Hagrid's words, they were harmless, taking to crawling all over each other and devouring milk pods, their preferred diet. Hagrid's return marked their increasing maturity; they were now spinning very fine, weak, thread.

"Now don't be fooled by that weak silk," Hagrid said passing the clusters of Gryffindors and Slytherins as they built structures for the morders to wrap their thread around. "A coupla months from today, and tha' stuff'll be stronger than a Gringott's vault door. Pretty too, if I remembered properly."

When the class was over, Hermione, Ron, Harry, and Jade stayed behind as their classmates trudged back up to the castle in the snow chatting about their anxieties regarding the up coming O.W.Ls, Quidditch, who likes who, and the like.

"So how was it Hagrid?" Harry asked the minute the last of the Slytherins were out of sight. The large man seated himself near one of the bonfires that were keeping the class, which was held outside, bearable.

"It was a bit harder than we thought," he admitted but quickly added, "no, no, nothing for you three to be worryin' about" at the sight of their alarmed faces.

"Yeh see," Hagrid continued, "You-Know-Who, or his Death Eaters at least, have already offered to extend a hand of friendship to the two largest giant communities in Bulgaria. It took a lot of meetin's and such on mine and Olympe's part, but in the end they agreed to a flimsy promise of neutrality."

"My parents are in Bulgaria," Jade said worriedly, the thought that the Dark Lord and his followers might be in the same country as her parents finally hitting her. "There hasn't been anything else since Karkaroff's death, has there?" Hagrid shook his head and patted Jade on the shoulder, pounding her several additional inches into the snow.

"No, nothin'," he said reassuringly. "Like I told yeh, fer now, everythin's stable. They're fine folk, they are," he adding winking.

"You've met them?" she asked brightening. "Oh, how are they? What do they look like?"

“But how?” Hermione asked curiously. “I mean, Dumbledore just got those letters and files a few days ago...”

“And who helped send those letters an’ files?” Hagrid asked smiling.

“So you were in on that,” Ron said grinning. “And sent just in time, I reckon.”

“What about Padfoot?” Harry asked hopefully. “Is he doing all right?” Then remembering his godfather’s wariness of Jade he added, “Does he know about her parents?”

“Tha’ reminds me,” Hagrid replied getting to his feet. “I almost forgot! Yer letter, Harry.” They followed him into his cabin to find a warm, welcoming fire, and Fang snoring loudly beside it. His large paws jerked about as if he were dreaming of chasing small, fluffy, creatures about. Hagrid searched the many pockets of his thick, black, coat until at last, he pulled out a letter.

“Owls are few and far between, some times,” he said winking as he handed it to Harry. He opened it as Ron, Hermione, and Jade seated themselves around him.

*Dear Harry,*

*I hope you are beginning to put that study guide to good use. After all the trouble I went through to put it together, I expect you’re holding it as one of your most prized possessions. I’m sorry I didn’t send an owl earlier, but it is slightly difficult coming by post when you’re out in the middle of nowhere. The threats have died away so don’t worry about me. I better hear that your worries consist of girls, quidditch, and O.W.Ls: nothing more dramatic than that.*

*If you didn’t know it, Jade’s parents have been found. Hagrid saw the records sent from the Bulgarian Ministry of Magic himself. I got a chance to meet her parents, under an alias of course. Just call me Mr. Strider; Headmaster Dumbledore’s personal representative. They’re a wonderful, eccentric couple and are thoroughly relieved and elated that she’s safe. Currently, they’re arranging to come to Hogwarts as soon as possible, but any traveling in this area has become difficult for the time being. I’ve got to leave now, and I’ll try to write again soon if my travels allow. Take care of yourself and tell Hermione and Ron hello for me.*

*Sirius*

A grin formed on Harry’s face as he looked up at his friends.

“Well,” Ron urged. “What’s it say?”

“Basically the same stuff Hagrid’s told us,” Harry replied glancing down at the letter. There was a postscript that he missed.

*p.s.: I know Jade’s got an identity now, but I’m asking you to be wary.*

“Anything else?” Hermione asked catching Harry’s attention.

“No, nothing,” he said a little too quickly, folding up the letter and stuffing it into his pocket. “Just that he says hi to you guys.” Again with the warning, even after knowing who Jade was, her history, and her parents. He didn’t want the three to see that part, and hoped they wouldn’t ask to see the letter. To his relief, they didn’t. Their attention had been steered away from the letter and news from Bulgaria by Hermione’s reminder of their next class.

\* \* \*

“Seamus!” Angelina exclaimed exasperatedly, swinging her broomstick round so that she pulled up beside him. “Are you planning to block any of those quaffles or not?” It was getting to be a long Friday morning practice. Harry yawned and for several minutes, forgot about the snitch as he and the rest of the rather groggy team pulled up around their captain.

“Sorry Cap,” Seamus said shakily. Since his fall during Gryffindor’s first game, he had been extremely edgy in the air. Angelina had been patient, but their next game was fast approaching, and Seamus had yet to regain his confidence.

“I just got to get focused, that’s all,” he continued pulling away with his sandy-haired head down. He landed several feet bellow her. Angelina sighed, a small cloud issuing from her mouth into the cold air before she followed suit and neatly landed beside him.

“Well, you’ve got to focus more sooner than later,” she said pushing the bitter tone from her voice. She grinned encouragingly and punched his shoulder gently. “You’re a great Keeper, Seamus. Don’t let one fall keep you down.”

“That’s right,” Fred added flying around their heads. “Just look at Harry.”

“Yeah,” George said. “He’s nearly died loads of times.”

“And I haven’t succeeded once,” Harry replied rolling his eyes. The twins dissolved in laughter and Seamus grinned appreciatively. Just then the snitch flew by, and Harry was on its tail, catching it easily.

“We haven’t worked on blocks in ages,” Katie announced just as Harry returned to the circle where his teammates hovered. “Seamus, you’ve got to forget about falling.”

“I know,” he replied from the ground, running a hand through it hair. “I will, I just need some time.” His teammates watched silently as he picked at the twigs that made up the tail of his broom. Alicia landed beside him and patted his shoulder sympathetically as Angelina sighed, glancing up at the faces of her team.

“All right,” she said almost painfully. “Let’s call it a morning. Everyone get out of here.” Harry put the snitch away watching as the twins wrestled the two bludgers to the ground. They hit the locker rooms, Harry giving Seamus a vote of confidence before hitting the showers.

“Harry!” Hermione called catching his attention, as he emerged damp-haired and dressed from the locker room doors. He waved to Ron and Hermione who were seated on a bench usually reserved for the teams or Madam Hooch.

“Lo guys,” Harry said flashing a grin at his friends, both of whom still looked rather puffy eyed and pale.

“Practice ended surprisingly early, didn’t it?” Hermione noted matter-of-factly as she waved to the departing twins. “We only just got here, and you were all done.”

“How do you do it, Harry?” Ron asked through a yawn. “It’s so early.” Harry yawned in return and shrugged.

“It’s not too bad,” he replied. “At least it was short today.”

“Seamus still not completely confident about flying yet, eh?” Ron asked wrapping his Chudley Cannons scarf around his neck.

“He hasn’t been since November,” Harry replied holding his broomstick across his shoulders.  
“Where’s Jade?”

“Still asleep,” Hermione answered batting away the tail end of the broomstick, which nearly smacked her as Harry walked. “We got the impression she didn’t want to come along this morning.”

“Oh really?” Ron asked raising an eyebrow. “Her nearly crucifying us for waking her before seven gave you that idea?”

\* \* \*

A quarter of an hour later, they were seated at the Gryffindor table next to Jade, Neville, and Ginny. The Great Hall was just filling with their fellow students, yawning and contently waiting for breakfast.

"How was practice?" Jade asked pleasantly serving herself some porridge.

"Bloody cheerful, you are in the morning," Ron said grinning. Harry sniggered and heaped kippers onto his plate. Jade shrugged her shoulders at Ron and returned her attention to Harry.

"Practice was all right," Harry answered shoveling some food into his mouth. "We didn't get much done though."

"It's the end of the week," Neville moaned to Ginny. "You know what that means; flying lessons start two days from today." Hermione's spoon stopped half way to her mouth.

"I nearly forgot about that," she murmured flatly. Ron looked from her to Neville and sighed.

"You'll be fine," he said. "Both of you. Flying is not as hard as you two make it out to be."

"Easy for you to say, you can practice at the Burrow," Hermione replied. "I haven't used a broom to sweep, much less fly, since I learned how to operate a vacuum machine."

"What's a vacuum machine?" Ron and Jade asked in unison. Hermione rolled her eyes as if to say "never mind" and cast a long expression at Harry, daring him to add anything.

"Don't look at me," he said, gulping. "I know what a vacuum machine is."

It was then a flutter of wings sounded throughout the hall. Mail had arrived. Owls in all colors and sizes swept down to their owners or designated persons to deliver letters and packages. Errol, the Weasley family's ancient owl, weaved towards Ron and Ginny in attempts to make a landing. He managed it eventually...into Hermione's porridge. Gingerly, she fished the old bird out and handed him to Ron.

"Now why wouldn't you just let Pig take care of it?" Ron mumbled, gently taking the letter from Errol's clutches. It was from Mrs. Weasley and he handed it over to Ginny so she could read it first. Harry got the impression that his friend just didn't want any more news about Percy.

Just as most of the owls began to depart to the owlery, Hedwig made an appearance, swooping gracefully over the Gryffindor table in a flash of winter white towards Harry.

"Hedwig!" he said happily making his forearm into a makeshift perch for her to land on. "It's been awhile since I've seen you." She hooted happily and nibbled his fingers affectionately. He started to remove the letter from her leg, but she fluttered away from him and made her way to Jade.

"Sorry Hedwig," Jade said, shrugging her shoulders. "I ate all my sausage today, didn't know to expect you—." The writing on the envelope caught her eye. In small careful writing, was *her* name. With shaking fingers, she untied the letter and gazed at it wide eyed. Hedwig had returned to Harry and was now nibbling the strip of bacon he held in his hand.

"Open it," Harry urged dropping the bacon to Hedwig's annoyance. With trembling hands, she ripped it open and slipped the carefully folded parchment from it.

"Whose it from?" Hermione asked, putting down her glass. Jade swallowed a lump that had begun to form in her throat.

"My parents," she said.

*To Our Dearest Jade,*

*I can't believe we've found you. It's felt like eternity these past few months, not knowing where you were. It was our fault for not staying with you, for not making sure you'd make it to Beauxbatons safely, its just your getting older and we got lax. I'm so sorry, honey, both your father and I. Professor Dumbledore has told us about you not remembering, and I want so badly to be there so that I can help you somehow. I hope you understand the stress in security and why we can't get to you right now, but I hope you're comfortable at Hogwarts. I want you to write so you can tell us all about your wonderful friends there, and all the fun you're taking care to have. I thought until we can meet, we could write so that our little pains could be eased a little. Your father and I have enclosed a photo, and the rest of this letter is mostly aimless writing about things I'm thinking and remembering about you, so that maybe you can remember yourself.*

Before Jade finished reading the rest of the letter, her fingers slipped back into the envelope and withdrew a photo of a handsome couple. The man was thick and broad shouldered with dark eyes a shape similar to her own. The woman was petite and slender, with dark straight hair just like her's. The two people smiled up at her, waving and blowing kisses. She ran a finger along the woman's dark hair and touched her own.

"What is it?" Hermione asked softly.

"This is what they look like," Jade said quietly a small smile flickering on her lips. She passed the photo around. "I wish I could remember them."

\* \* \*

By the end of breakfast, she had finished the rest of the letter, then read it a half dozen times more, laughing as she read aloud bits and pieces of her mother's writing which recounted her times of utter humiliation. Ron nearly choked on his milk when she read the part about her ten-year-old self sprouting fur because she had fallen into a vat of hair soup her mother was stewing for her grandfather. Jade's light spirit was contagious and soon, even Neville was laughing, forgetting that in two days he would be facing Flying lessons again.

\* \* \*

Later that day, they entered their Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Jade taking seats next to each other near the front. The bell rang and Remus Lupin entered, listening intently to Darcy Dumont who accompanied him and was talking exuberantly in a hushed tone. They made their way to the front of the class, Lupin letting a brief smile flicker onto his face as he turned to look at his students.

"Well then," he began putting his rather tattered briefcase, the rope that held it shut fraying badly, onto the desk before him. "Looks like we're ready to begin." There was a shuffle of papers and quills as his students prepared for their lesson.

"Anyway," he continued. "I trust you all know the staff substitute, Professor Dumont. It has dawned on me that the semester leading up to O.W.Ls will only become more intense. Oh don't worry...more on my part than yours. But along with my unpredictable...health and preoccupations, I'm afraid I will not be able to prepare you all sufficiently enough. So, I have asked Professor Dumont to be a sort of assistant in class if perhaps she didn't have one to teach on her own." A panic seemed to find its way onto Hermione's face as Lupin ended his sentence.

"She has spent years researching defense tactics against the Dark Arts, traveled around the world, and has attended several Universities of Magic for her doctorate endeavors," Lupin said as if trying to bring some comfort to Hermione (and others who feared Dumont's destruction factor would make it impossible for them to pass their O.W.Ls). "She's really too qualified to be just an assistant." At that a pleased smile spread on Dumont's pretty, round face, and she ducked her head and fiddled with her oblong glasses. It was strange to see the ditzy young woman so child-like, thought Harry, and know that she had very strong convictions against Dumbledore's decisions about both Jade and the fight against Voldemort.

"All right," Lupin said turning to the blackboard, as a stream of letters issued from the tip of his wand and onto the blank slate. "Let's begin the New Year with lessons in defending one's self with the power of the mind."

To the left of Harry, Jade looked as if she had steeled herself for an onslaught of notes. He had to fight the grin of amusement from forming on his face as he watched her frantically copying down diagrams from the board.

Most of the period was made up by a lecture with the occasional demonstration in dueling, and how focusing the power of the mind proved much more efficient in wand-work than merely just learning spells. Dumont demonstrated these examples as Lupin commentated, and her true abilities as a scholar were finally witnessed. Though scattered-brained and destructive in Potions, Dumont moved with a magnificent grace in Defense. As she used the *lumos* spell to burn a hole through a three-inch block of wood, Ron's jaw hit the floor. From a few seats down, Seamus had tumbled off his chair in surprise.

"That takes so much focus," Hermione had muttered more to herself than anyone else. "She's...she's brilliant."

In no time the class ended, but not without Hermione raking up twenty-five points for Gryffindor. Everyone was packing up, but Jade was still bent over her small score of notes.

"Come on, Jade," Harry said. "We're going to be late for Herbology."

"I don't get it," she muttered dropping her head onto the desk with a loud 'flwump'. Harry and Ron grimaced at the sound of head smacking wood.

"Why? Why? Why?" Jade asked hopelessly, her forehead pressed against the desk.

"It was a difficult lesson," Hermione said reassuringly. "You'll get it, you just need to go over the chapter again."

"Ow," she muttered lamely in response, face still buried in her notes.

"Maybe this will help."

The voice startled all four of them, reminding them that Lupin and Dumont were still in the classroom. Dumont stood before them, a book held in her out-stretched hand. It was thick and battered, with a binding that was slowly ripping. Across the cover was a splash of something that looked remarkably like dried blood. Jade looked up at the peculiar professor, her face slack.

"Sorry?"

"I overheard you were having some trouble in Defense Against the Dark Arts," Dumont replied, placing the book down in front of Jade. "This is a great study guide designed to secure basics in Defense; it's saved me exam after exam when I was in the University." Lupin cleared his throat and Dumont glanced at him.

"It'll be a good way for her to catch up a little," he said turning back to them. Harry couldn't help but gawk. He had overheard Dumont arguing with Snape several times, and he was almost sure she had something against Jade. But why was she bothering to help her with her studies if she didn't want her at Hogwarts? Jade glanced at the book then looked up at Lupin. For a while he didn't say anything. At long last, he smiled and nodded.

"I don't know why I didn't come up with it myself," he said picking up the book and examining it. "This is the only Globally Standard book for Defense Against the Dark Arts worth reading." He handed it to Jade who took it.

"Thank you," she said to Dumont. "Is it okay if I borrow it until the O.W.Ls?"

"No, keep it," the Professor said shaking her head light-heartedly, the golden curls bouncing around her face. "I think it will be much more informative for you now than it will be to me." She stared at Jade, as if burning her image into her eyes. Lupin shifted uncomfortably, and called for Dumont's attention. Perhaps Dumont was having a change of heart about Jade.

## 16. A Few Slips of the Tongue

"This is going to be simply awful," Hermione moaned using the toe of her shoe to nudge the broomstick beside her.

"Hermione!" Ron exclaimed rolling his eyes stepping up beside his own broom. "It's a broomstick, not a blast-ended skrewt! It's not going to bite you...or burn you...or even sting you for that matter." Hermione cast him a rather peeved glare.

"Just go along with it Hermione," Harry said leaning on his Firebolt, flashing a smile of reassurance for her. "You always end up being great at everything, what's different about this?" A brilliant blush appeared on her cheeks as she kicked aimlessly at the icy, slushy, mess that was snow under her feet.

"This won't break a nasty landing," she muttered ignoring Harry's words of encouragement.

"Tell you what I'll do," Jade said with mock seriousness in her voice. "I'll fall off first, than you can use me as a nice target to land on. Sure, you might have to flail your arms a bit, but I'm sure your aim is as good as your Transfiguration skills." Ron and Harry sniggered but were silenced by the icy glower Hermione had on her face.

"If you ask me, flying is terribly fun," Mandy Brocklehurst said pleasantly from across the way. "It's nothing you should get all hot and bothered about."

"Well, nobody asked you, did they?" Hermione seemed ready to shoot back until a jab in the ribs (courtesy of Ron) stopped her.

"Mr. Potter! If you could join me for a second!" Madam Hooch called from down the line. He left his friends and made his way towards the flying instructor.

"Now I'd like to get started, even though our other aide has yet to arrive," she said pulling on her dragon-hide gloves. "Very unlike her, but—," she was interrupted by a girl calling her name. She was racing towards them, cloak haphazardly thrown around her shoulders, broomstick in tow.

"I'm so sorry, Madam Hooch," Cho Chang said between breaths. "I forgot my broom wasn't in the shed. I had to run back up to the castle... 'lo, Harry."

"Quite all right, my dear," Hooch replied. "Knew you'd only be late for a reasons. But you're right on time. I'll need you two to help out when everyone's up in the air." With that she began her instructions. "Nothing new today. Just place your right hand over your broom and say 'up'..."

"All right, Cho?" Harry managed without sounding too stiff.

"Fantastic, as soon as I catch my breath," she replied. "I forgot I keep my broom in the castle now."

"You couldn't leave a Nimbus 2001 in a broom shed," Harry replied at an attempt at wit. "It'd get cold and lonely. No, best if it were kept comfortable and cozy in front of a common room fire." Cho laughed pushed him good-naturedly. Harry grinned triumphantly through a very pink blush; Smart Motor Skills: one, Stark Humility: zero.

"I haven't the heart to keep it anywhere else," she replied, pulling her dark hair into a ponytail. They stood and watched as the students mounted their brooms and began to hover. Jade was doing well, and surprisingly so was Neville. Hermione was shaky and looked as if she were holding on for dear life two feet from the ground...but never the less, she was two feet off the ground. Ron's command of his broom was fluid and seemed completely effortless. Obviously he had been practicing with his brothers over the summer at the Burrow, and once again, Harry wondered why he didn't seem interested in trying out for the quidditch team in October.

"All right, now that you've all successfully lifted off," Madam Hooch was saying. "We're going to try some exercises to increase your expertise in air. Now don't look so worried, Mr. Longbottom, it isn't nearly as difficult as that look on your face makes it out to be."

"Seamus looks more nervous than Neville," Cho noted with concern. "And he's on your quidditch team."

“With the likes of him on the team, Gryffindor’s destined to loose,” came a drawling voice that whipped both Harry and Cho around. “I almost feel sorry for you, Potter.” Cho’s face darkened, and Harry refrained from knocking the smirk off Malfoy’s face with his broom.

“Yeah, well I feel the same way about your mother,” Harry said evenly, “having to give birth to you, and all.” Malfoy’s pale face flushed but he quickly regained his composure crossing his arms.

“Now let’s not be jealous just because your mother isn’t alive.” That nearly did it. If it weren’t for Cho holding him back or Angelina Johnson walking towards them, Harry would have clobbered the tall, pale, boy.

“What are you doing here?” Angelina exclaimed to Malfoy, looking a bit exasperated. “Let me guess, Avery couldn’t figure out how to get out of the Slytherin common room.”

“If you must know,” he said looking with equal distaste back at her, “Avery’s got the flu, and he’s currently smoking at the ears from some potion or another whipped up by the nurse. I’m here to represent him...and the Slytherin quidditch team.”

“What?” Harry and Cho asked confused looking from Malfoy to Angelina.

“Somehow they managed to cheat Gryffindor out of stadium privileges for a week,” Angelina said hotly pulling her shoulders straight as to not hide her elegant height. “We need times to practice...especially with Seamus’s circumstance.”

“Ms Chang! Mr. Potter! If you would!” Madam Hooch hollered from above their heads. She landed when she spotted Malfoy and Angelina.

“I suppose you two can handle the class for a moment, while I have a quick conference with Mr. Malfoy and Ms Johnson,” she said brushing at her spotless black robes. “Just make sure no one kills themselves.” Harry and Cho cast uncertain glances at each other before taking off towards the group of gliding students up above. They were weaving around each other, tossing several balls slightly smaller than a quaffle from one person to the next. Jade was catching on quickly as was Neville who caught every single ball thrown to him. Harry watched as Hermione dropped one and Ron gracefully swooped to catch it. Seamus was the only one who didn’t seem keen about this sort of ‘game’. He flew slowly in circles a few short feet from the ground, looking up as if the sky would begin to fall at any minute.

“Heads up!”

With instincts built from hours of quidditch practice, he ducked as one of the balls sailed over his head. Ron had pulled up in front of him, catching it easily.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” Jade said sheepishly pulling up next to him. “Well, my papers did say I played football, not quidditch. Hey Cho.”

“Hey, Jade,” Cho replied ducking herself as one of the Ravenclaws sent a ball speeding towards her. “Who knew we had so many natural chasers?”

“Where’s Hermione?” Harry asked after commenting on Ron’s seemingly hidden skills.

“She was behind me a second ago,” Ron replied, a cold gust wind rustling his hair, making it look like his head was aflame. “Oh there she is.” He pointed several feet away from them where Hermione looked as if she was clinging desperately to her broom in the gust. She kept on swerving even as Dean tried to persuade her to attempt to catch the ball. Ron’s eyes narrowed.

“What’s that git trying to do?” he said under his breath heatedly as he turned and made his way over to Dean and Hermione. “Don’t tell me he’s giving her flying advice.”

“What’s going on down there?” Jade asked them curiously gazing at Malfoy, Angelina, and Madam Hooch.

“Something about Slytherin taking practice time from the Gryffindors,” Cho said. “They’d try anything to win.” Angelina was shaking her head unbelievably, looking as if she had been personally insulted. Madam Hooch seemed a bit befuddled by the argument, picking up her clipboard and examining the quidditch practice schedule.

“Ben! Kyle! Stop it!” Cho hollered at two Ravenclaws who were attempting to bean each other in the head with the balls. She rolled her eyes at Harry and Jade before taking off to stop them.

“Seamus looks like he could use that practice time,” Jade said sympathetically watching the form of the sandy-haired boy several yards below.

“You better get practicing again,” Harry said nodding towards Seamus. She agreed, winked, and then took off as a Ravenclaw boy tossed her a ball. He turned his broom and quickly descended through the swooping mess of flyers.

“All right, Seamus?” Harry asked pulling up beside him.

“Could be better,” he admitted bitterly.

“Don’t beat yourself up, it’s completely understandable.”

“No it’s not,” Seamus replied examining a splinter on one end of his Nimbus 2000. “I’m bloody scared out of my trousers about flying.”

“You just need time,” Harry replied.

“But that’s what we don’t have.” With that, he flew away and landed near Malfoy, Angelina, and Madam Hooch, dropping his broom and plopping himself down beside it. Madam Hooch was now talking solely to Angelina who still looked utterly upset. They didn’t notice that Malfoy had picked up a fallen ball and was examining the flying students above him. A dangerous smirk was upon his face as he took aim. Before Harry could register whom he was aiming at, he threw the ball with surprising strength at Hermione several feet above.

“Hermione!” Harry yelled, but he was too far away. Suddenly, Ron, in a blur of red hair, his cloak billowing out behind him, sped gracefully towards her in attempts to intercept the skillfully thrown ball. Everyone seemed to freeze, watching the unfolding scene. Angelina watched with mouth agape from the ground. Hermione’s eyes were like those of a deer caught in headlights. She was clinging helplessly to her broom as Ron swept up in front of the ball and caught it easily. The force of the impact drove him back, nearly toppling her, but he had thrown his other arm around her waist to steady her.

“Hermione! You okay?” Ron asked breathlessly. Hermione’s arms were now wrapped tightly around Ron’s neck, her face buried in his shoulder, as Harry and Jade raced towards them.

“Crap, are you okay?” Jade asked, eyes wide.

“Hermione!” Ron gasped turning a funny shade of blue. “Too tight! Air!”

It was then Hermione’s brown eyes snapped open and narrowed.

“Who did that?” she growled angrily, pushing herself away from Ron a bit. Ron gaped at her.

“Well,” he muttered hoarsely, mouth ajar. “Don’t mention it, anytime you need saving, feel free to call and I’ll be happy to let you strangle me.”

“It was Malfoy,” Harry said, brows furrowed. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Give me that!” she growled, ripping the ball from Ron’s hand. She threw it with death-like accuracy at Malfoy who was doubled over with laughter, and was saved from another fall by Harry and Jade. It was right on target.

“Damn it!” they heard Malfoy cry out, blood spurting from his nose.

“What—,” Madam Hooch was looking at the display before her in utter bewilderment. “Mr. Malfoy! Everyone! Everyone come down now! Mr. Thomas! Don’t you dare throw that!” Angelina, who was right beside the flying instructor, was still staring straight up, particularly at Ron, eyes glazed over as if the lanky red-haired form were that of an angel.

“Why didn’t Ron try out for keeper?” she murmured slowly.

\* \* \*

“I didn’t try out because number one, I was planning on trying out as a beater next year,” Ron was explaining to the members of the Gryffindor quidditch team later that evening in the common room.

“That’s right,” Fred said.

“Following in his brothers’ footsteps,” George added.

“And two, Fred and George blew up my broom,” Ron finished.

“We didn’t mean too,” George said.

“Who knew dung bombs and twigs were combustible?” Fred added with a guilty grin. Angelina rolled her eyes at the twins and returned her attention to Ron.

“We’ll get you a broom,” she said. “Keeper’s not that different from beater...I mean you don’t use a bat or anything, or even hit bludgers for that matter, but other than that, they’re exactly the same!” At that, Harry looked sideways at his overly eager captain.

“Yeah, Ang,” Fred said rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Why didn’t I see that before?”

“But,” Ron began looking up at Seamus. Surprisingly the sandy-haired boy was grinning from ear to ear.

“I’ll even lend you my broom,” Seamus announced.

“But you’re keeper,” Ron insisted going red in the face. Harry knew Ron would have killed for a chance to be on the quidditch team, but if it meant possibly trampling on someone else’s dignity, he wouldn’t touch it with a 20-foot broomstick.

“I’m not going to lie to you all,” Seamus said, suddenly looking loads more confident. “If I have to play in two months, I’m not going to be able to...which would hurt me more than giving up my position when I know I’m not ready for it now. Listen mate, I feel better about backing out of the team now that I’m sure I’m not leaving them one-member short.” Ron’s brow furrowed and he looked up at Harry as if silently asking his advice. Harry just shrugged and waited along with the rest of the team for Ron’s answer.

“Okay,” he finally said, but before a cheer could erupt from the team members Ron continued. “But under one condition.”

“Fine Ron,” George said sighing dramatically. “You can have my autograph.”

“No, you git,” Ron replied raising his eyebrows at his brother. “My condition is that Seamus will play the last game, because... because Keeper is rightfully his position.”

“Deal mate,” Seamus replied looking relieved and reached out to shake on it. They cheered and Harry clapped his best friend on the back, as a wickedly silly grin appeared on Ron’s face. Eventually, after hands were shaken and Angelina had uttered words of thanks, the teammates dispersed, leaving Ron and Harry seated near the fireplace. Jade made her way over, the battered Defense Against the Dark Arts guide in her hands.

“Congrats Ron,” Jade said giving him a high five.

“You heard?” he asked surprised.

“I just heard all that cheering and figured it out,” she said. “Yep, just me and my gray matter.” Harry and Ron grinned at her as she plopped down in an armchair across from them.

“Where’s Hermione?” Ron said looking around. “I want to tell her the news.”

“I think she’s still down on the grounds receiving her punishment for smacking Malfoy with that ball,” Jade replied, opening up to the chapter she was reading. “Bloody good will to mankind, what she did.”

“Still?” Harry asked disbelievingly. “What? Did Madam Hooch send her through the Gauntlet *twice*?” As if on cue, the portrait swung open and Hermione stepped in looking as if there was an extra spring in her step.

“Hermione guess what?” Ron said excitedly. “I’m on the quidditch team! Where in the hell have you been?”

“Oh, I’m very well thank you,” she replied sarcastically. “How about yourself?” Ron looked as if he were about to retort but Harry interrupted him.

“What took so long?” he asked. “I mean the most that could have happened to you was a detention.”

“You’d think, huh?” she replied simply.

“You didn’t get one?” Jade asked, shutting her book.

“No,” Hermione answered smugly. All three of them stared at her, waiting for an explanation.

“Madam Hooch claims she didn’t see a thing,” she said with a grin. “Little Draco had a fit though, and she told him off about it, with me there as witness of course.”

“No punishment?” Harry asked in awe.

“A reward actually,” Hermione answered with a content smile on her face. “You should have seen the look on Malfoy’s face. Congratulations by the way, Ron.”

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“It’s another package from my parents,” Jade said happily dragging a large box out of the Great Hall and up the staircase. Ron and Harry pressed themselves against the wall to avoid being run over by it.

“I’ve learned my lesson though,” she said, blowing a wisp of hair off her face. “I’ll open it in the hospital wing...just incase my mum sent me underwear again.” Hermione sighed at Jade’s bluntness and helped her levitate the box up the stairs, as Harry and Ron made to follow them. They made it to the infirmary where Jade excitedly tore the brown wrapping off the box. Inside were several articles of muggle clothing, numerous personal items including a stuffed dragon and a small pile of books. She rooted through the items as Hermione helped her organize them in a bureau Filch had dragged into the hospital wing for her.

“Come on, now,” Ron whined crossing and uncrossing his arms. “I want to grab some toast before Transfigurations.”

“You just ate,” Harry said leaning against the door.

“I know that,” he replied. “But I also know that a meager bowl of porridge, two hard-boiled eggs, and an apricot Danish thingy aren’t going to hold me over till lunch.” Hermione looked at him and cocked an eyebrow.

“What?”

\* \* \*

After a lunch of hot soups and deli sandwiches, they found themselves fighting through the crowd of students to their next class. Ron and Harry were talking about committing to the demanding schedules of quidditch practice while Hermione juggled her armful of books.

“I really think you should give Arithmancy one more go,” Hermione was saying to Jade. “I mean, its so much more logical than Divinations...if I just help you study a bit more.”

“She hasn’t even tried Divinations yet, Hermione,” Harry said shifting his bag by rolling back his shoulders. “It isn’t that bad.”

"Oh," Hermione replied indignantly, "other then the fact that Trewlawney's lessons are...well...are—"

"A crock of shit?" Ron asked mildly.

"Ron!"

"What'd I say?"

"Its not that I don't believe you when you say Divinations is not a class worth taking, Hermione," Jade said. "I'm taking it because I simply don't understand Arithmancy. I'm just no good at it. All those numbers and their patterns, which one relates to which and how they mark the exact date of ...a horrible acne breakout or, or...." Jade rolled her eyes up so that only the whites were showing, curled her fingers, and let her tongue loll out unattractively.

"Point taken," Hermione muttered looking far from amused.

"Perfectly good point," Harry said with a laugh.

"The only thing I'm going to miss about that class," Jade continued wiping a bit of spit off her chin. "Is hanging out with you. If you didn't know it Hermione, you're a great friend." A brilliant blush swept Hermione's cheek and she uncrossed her arms, muttering something inaudible under her breath.

"Fine," she finally spoke up, not able to prevent a smile from spreading on her face. "But this better mean you'll pull up your marks in Defense Against the Dark Arts." She waved goodbye to them and turned towards the Arithmancy classroom as they continued forward. They passed the picture of Sir Cadogan who nearly ripped himself from the canvas when they approached. A few minutes later, Ron and Harry were leading Jade further up the North tower and up the silver ladder to Trelawney's classroom.

"You're taking this class now?" Lavender asked Jade curiously as she stepped through the trap door. Then she looked at Ron and Harry who had just pulled themselves through after her.

"I hope you find it as enthralling as those two do," she added flatly, choosing a seat next to Parvati on a pouf in the center of the room. Harry and Ron looked at each other and shrugged as Jade led them to a small table near a window right behind one occupied by Seamus, Dean, and Neville. Before any proper greetings could ensue, a familiar misty voice called for their attention. Trelawney stood in front of the perfumed fireplace, her back turned to them.

"My Inner Eye sees a new presence here today," she said slowly as if reading it from the flames. "We are one student more."

"What her inner eye has seen is her new class roster," Ron muttered rolling his eyes. Jade let out a laugh, but promptly clamped a hand over her mouth. Trelawney turned around, the yards of her gauzy, spangled, shawl flying around her spindly body.

"It's nice to see you in the physical world, Ms Cordonnier," she said looking straight at Jade who cleared her throat nervously. She managed a glare at Ron. The Professor paused for a second, before looking away from their table and dramatically sweeping across the room towards a shelf. On it were several moldy looking decks of peculiar cards.

"As we have spent much of last term exploring the rather ambiguous study of seeking the future from the dead," she said picking up a deck and turning to face her students. "We will now move on to the far more sensible art of tarot card reading." Harry raised an eyebrow at the word "sensible". She began to call her students forth handing each group of three a deck. Ron wrinkled his nose when she handed him a particularly moldy deck. He returned to their table and dropped it unconcernedly in front of Jade and Harry.

"The cards are of an ancient tool designed to reflect your most potent energies," she said, her voice low and mysterious. "They can lead you to the road of success if you consult them properly, or warn of precarious danger in your future." She paused and turned slowly so that she could cast a forlorn look at Harry. He refrained from groaning out loud and instead directed his eyes towards a silly drawing of a woman in bejeweled spectacles stuck in a crystal ball Ron was sketching onto his parchment. Jade was quickly taking notes in the margins of her Divinations book.

"For some of us," she continued turning from Harry with a tear in her eye. "The readings will come easily...for others they may be muddled and unclear. It takes a true-seer to completely comprehend the placements of the cards and their symbols, but anyone could glimpse a bit of the future if they concentrate."

"Er...Professor?" Dean asked raising a shaky hand. "Do these decks include the Death card? I've seen them in loads of horror movies and the girl always dies after seeing it."

"What?" Seamus asked as his eyebrows rose incredulously. Trelawney turned and peered at him through her bejeweled spectacles. Harry and Lavender were probably the only ones who knew what Dean was talking about.

"Why yes," she replied, simply ignoring the fact that she knew nothing of "horror movies". "But the Death card is the least of your worries—" Dean looked slightly more relaxed "—It's the Tower card you must be wary of...it is a foreboding sign." Neville gulped.

"We will start the lesson off with a simple three card spread," she began moving towards the winged armchair before the fireplace. "That is, one card for the past, one card for the present, and one card for the future." She shuffled her beautiful deck of cards, which had been kept in a dark wood box, and magicked a small table to her.

"Lavender? Parvati? I have perceived for several days now that you two would be assisting me." The girls looked at each other eagerly and moved to two chairs facing Trelawney and her little table. Harry's stomach churned. He had been sitting in one of those chairs when that strange message from his dream appeared from the indicator of Trelawney's Ouiji board. It was the day he had found Jade. He turned to look at her, feeling how strange it was that those dreams had led to those words spelt out by the mystical board, and those words had led to Jade's rather miraculous...and mysterious arrival. Maybe he was gifted with the Inner Eye and was just too plain dense to know it. It was coincidental, he thought pushing it from his mind. It shouldn't matter now, Jade was not an omen, but a friend. Her arrival may be strange, but there are more enigmatic things in the world then one could ever find answers for...would Harry had believed in a Magic world before those letters arrived at Privet Drive?

"Now you will take turns being the reader," Trelawney continued her dark hair glistening in the candlelight. "Hand the seeker the deck of cards and ask them to shuffle than cut it. As they concentrate on their energies, place the top three cards in a row before you. Looking in chapter eleven of our book, you will find the meaning of cards."

"Well now, looks like the Seeker gets to go first," Ron quipped.

"Very funny," Harry replied. "Are you taking your show on the road?" Ron grinned and handed him the deck. He shuffled and cut them, before handing them back to Ron.

"The backs should be facing up," Jade noted.

"Up, down, does it matter?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "It does."

"Excuse me," Harry interrupted. "Can we get on with predicting when my next scheduled death will be?" Jade raised an eyebrow. Harry and Ron quickly explained to her Trelawney's adorable little quirk about predicting deaths. She nodded knowingly explaining Hermione's habit of sharing her views about Trelawney's credibility.

"All right then," she said, now thoroughly amused. "Get on with it." Ron laid out the cards, three in a row. He then flipped them over left to right.

"Okay...the left is your past," he murmured placing the rest of the pack down as he mulled over the pictures and their meanings in his book. "Okay, you've got the...erm...it looks like a cow. Is there a cow card?" Harry rolled his eyes and peered into his own book.

"It's a man, I think," he said. "Yeah, that's right, it's the Hermit."

"Right," Ron replied consulting his book. "Your past consists of searching for the truth and being alone. Okay, that's close enough. On to your present...it's the Judgment card...that means that you're going to have to make an important decision. And lastly—" Ron paused theatrically "—your future...behold." He turned over the Strength card.

"Er...it says that you have 'male energy', but may need a fuse of 'female energy'," he looked up at Harry. "There is no way I'm interpreting that." Jade burst out laughing and Ron and Harry joined until one icy glare from Trelawney came their way.

"My turn," Jade said. She handed the cards to Ron and took them back after he had shuffled and cut them.

"First card is the...Hanged Man," Jade read. "It means you see things differently than others around you. The second one, your present, is the Magician, how very appropriate. Yes, that means things will happen to you, for good or for worse, like magic. That really isn't a prediction as we do live in the Wizarding world...I can see why Hermione shuns this class."

"Yeah, yeah, go on," Ron replied.

"And your future...nice Ron—," she grinned mischievously at him. "The Lovers card. It means that you'll find that special someone in the future, but only after you find understanding in yourself."

"What!?" Ron asked wide-eyed. "That's so not.... its...so *not* wicked! How incredibly boring!"

"But look, they're naked," Jade replied amused, dancing the card of the two nude lovers in front of Ron and Harry's face. Harry grinned and pushed the card away hurrying Jade to shuffle the deck.

"How 'bout the Death card? Or maybe that cool bear thing," Ron was muttering. "No, the Lovers card...I knew I should have been concentrating on my energies more."

"You would have blown a fuse," Harry replied taking the cards back and laying them out on the table. "Right then, your past, Jade." Suddenly her laughter quieted.

"Yeah?"

"It's the...Hierophant card, that means that you've made a life-altering decision."

"That's very vague," she murmured.

"For you present...erm...it's the Death card."

"Gee Ron, jealous?" she asked, the grin returning to her face. Ron stuck his tongue out at her.

"And that means a cycle of change," Harry read from his text. "And finally, your future." Trelawney was now peering at Jade's cards over Harry's shoulder. He looked up at her before turning it over. It was the Tower card. Trelawney's face paled and she backed away."

"What? Jade asked. "Is Ron going to beat me in chess again?"

"It means major change against you," Harry read and wrinkled his brow.

"But *not* when it appears after the Death card!" Trelawney cried out weakly, throwing out a bejeweled hand onto their table to steady herself.

"That, Ms Cordonnier, is an omen," the Professor said woefully. Harry sighed and rolled his eyes. Wait for it...

"An omen of DEATH!" a few gasps escaped from several areas of the room. Ron hastily changed his snigger into a hacking cough as Jade stared at Trelawney calmly.

"Well," Jade said smiling at the faces around her. "Who knew I'd be the lucky student this term?"

“Don’t you see?” Trelawney said in a high, choking voice as she collapsed into an armchair Parvati had pulled up for her. “Those cards together mean that all the universe is against your life. You, my poor and wretched girl, will soon meet your end.”

“Oh,” Lavender and Parvati whimpered. The tight look had returned to Dean’s face.

“For god’s sake,” Ron exclaimed. “That’s what all this mumbo jumbo’s been saying about Harry for ages, and he’s not dead yet.” Harry glared at his friend.

“Thanks Ron.”

“Anytime.”

Jade looked thoroughly unaffected. She turned serious for a moment and looked directly at Seamus.

“Mr. Finnigan, I see Death in your future,” she said her face completely stolid. “I’m sorry, but you’ve only eighty years to live.” Ron couldn’t hold it in. He started laughing, and soon everyone had joined in, even Parvati and Lavender who hid their smiles behind their hands. Trelawney suddenly looked less winded and more vengeful.

“I believe that is the end of the lesson,” she said, her misty voice suddenly very snippy. “All the all-telling energies in this room have been temporarily dispersed...by those who do not understand them. If you would return your cards, and neatly charmed to stay together please, I would wholly appreciate it. Mr. Longbottom, please check under you chair for I have foreseen that your deck is incomplete.” She turned from Harry’s table and took her place in front of the fireplace.

“Something tells me I’m not going to get very high marks in this class either,” Jade murmured.

\* \* \*

“My big fat mouth,” Jade said almost in an air of defeat after she, Ron, and Harry had met up with Hermione on third floor. “I thought you guys said Divinations was easy.”

“Relax,” Harry said shrugging. “She hasn’t graded you on reacting to her death omens yet.”

“I told you,” Hermione said knowingly. “It’s a very woolly subject, Divinations is, and so is that Professor. Are you sure you wouldn’t like to give Arithmancy another go?” The thought of trying to cram in more studying seem to shrink her.

“I’ll pass, thanks,” Jade replied weakly. It was then a translucent figure slid though the wall directly into her. She shivered and fell backwards her teeth chattering.

“Nick!” Harry exclaimed. “Haven’t seen you in ages.” Nearly Headless Nick, the benign Gryffindor ghost greeted them warmly then looked over at Jade.

“Sorry about that,” he said, fixing his ruff. “I believe you’re a new one, if I be nearly headless.”

“Jade,” Hermione said. “This is the Nick, the Gryffindor ghost. Sir Nicholas, this is Jade.”

“I thought I’ve seen all the ghost of Hogwarts,” Jade said getting up and greeting him.

“Yes, well, I’ve been traveling a bit,” he said cordially pulling an old parchment from his breast pocket. “Pursuing an acceptance to the Headless Hunt, which hasn’t been fruitful mind you...I’m thinking I might start a petition.”

“Nearly headless?” Jade asked, suddenly realizing how strange that sounded.

“Oh, don’t do it, Nick,” Hermione said looking pained. But before she could further protest, the ghost grabbed his ear and pulled, letting his head flop onto his shoulder like a hinged door.

“That’s talent,” Jade said approvingly. Nick beamed at her proudly and flopped his head back on.

“Quite a dreary talent,” he admitted and shrugged. “But still...not enough for the comrades of the Headless Hunt. Suppose I start a *Nearly Headless Hunt*? Do you think that’ll go well, Harry?”

“I don’t know,” he replied awkwardly. “Being nearly headless is almost....a...erm...a unique quirk of yours.”

"Oh, you flatter me. Damned if I had to die partially beheaded, I could still *feel* my head flopping around on this bit of skin and sinew before I actually died."

"Nick, please," Ron said turning a shade of green.

"What was it like?" Jade asked curiously. "When you died, I mean?" It was the same curiosity she had about Professor Binn's ghost/death history.

"Oh, quite dreadful," he replied suddenly looking very pleased. "Really like the very fibers holding you to your body ripping away. Not pleasant at all."

"Oh no!" Hermione exclaimed looking at her watch. "We're late for Herbology. Sorry, but we should go."

"Perhaps we could discuss it another time?" Jade said hopefully. Ron and Harry raised eyebrows at each other.

"Oh yes," Nick said once again, fixing his ruff. "It'd be delightful."

"I doubt it," Ron muttered as they said goodbye and dashed down the stairs and out onto the grounds towards the greenhouses.

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Hermione watched as Parvati and Lavender mulled over a set of Tarot cards with mild distaste.

"The only thing they're going to get from those are paper cuts," she replied simply before returning her attention to her Shepard's pie.

"And at the dinner table," Jade added sarcastically. "Oh hi, Angelina." Angelina had gotten up from her spot up the table next to Fred and joined them. She greeted them with a grin.

"Here you go, Ron," she said handing him a bit of parchment. "We've got to start practice right away. First morning one is tomorrow...so best get your rest. You'll make sure he shows up, all right Harry?"

"He's pretty dangerous during pre-dawn hours," Harry replied. Angelina grinned and departed. Ron was examining the schedule with a pained expression.

"Mornings three times a week?" he moaned. "And Saturdays? Maybe I'm not cut out for this after all."

"I think a little discipline couldn't hurt you, Ron," Hermione said sipping from her glass.

"Are you trying to say something?" he asked.

"Just that it'd be good for you."

"It's not that bad," Harry said in attempts to prevent a fight. "You get use to it quick enough."

"I bet," Ron said dryly finishing his second helping of stew.

Soon the Great Hall began emptying as students finished desert and made their way out, some milling about the Entrance Hall. Harry led the way out, filling Hermione in on their first Divinations class of the year.

"Ron's got the Lovers card," Harry said with a grin. Ron turned a brilliant red.

"Well, just another example how woolly Divinations is," Hermione replied.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked.

"It means that Hermione is saying that its unlikely you would get a Lovers—," Jade began.

"I know that!"

"Hey guys," Cho said waving from her spot a few feet ahead of them. Harry's face went scarlet. It took a moment for him to move his feet, and when he finally did he greeted her in return.

"Heard about you making the team, Ron," she said when they reached her. "Congratulations."

"Thanks," Ron replied. He still sounded bitter about the morning practices.

"You wouldn't make a bad Chaser either, Hermione," Cho added. "Awesome throw by the way." Hermione smiled, pleased at the comment.

"Anyway Harry I just wanted to tell you that Madam Hooch is thinking of making Flying lessons a little shorter so—" She never finished. A group of Gryffindor fourth years tore up the stairs in a horse-playing frenzy, knocking Cho off her feet. She overbalanced and fell into Harry, who threw his arms around her waist to catch her.

"You okay?" he asked, his face burning. She blushed in returned and just nodded her head.

"Stop that!" Hermione called out. "I'll take away points, I swear!" She flashed her prefect badge and began telling the boys off.

"Er...could you..." Cho stammered arms still wrapped around Harry's neck. Jade sniggered as Harry finally released Cho.

"What?" Cho asked her, brushing at her robes.

"Nothing," Jade said with a grin. "It's just that I almost think Harry should have been the one to pull the Lovers card—," Jade's hands flew to her mouth as Harry's jaw dropped.

He couldn't believe it. He couldn't believe Jade had just said that....*that* in front of Cho.

"Oh crap," Jade muttered.

"Sorry about that, Cho," Hermione was saying as she returned. "Some boys are just so very childlike." She stopped when she noticed the silence around her.

"I mean not that he likes you or anything," she blurted out. "Damn it..." She looked from Hermione to Ron for help.

"Oy, Cho!" a Ravenclaw sixth year called from up the stairs. "You coming?"

"Oh," Cho said snapping out of it, waving to her friend. "Yeah, I...sorry. I got to go." She smiled briefly at Harry and left. Harry couldn't manage to rejoin his chin to his face. He turned and watched her go, making an incomprehensible gurgling sound.

"Oh god," Jade said quietly. "I'm so sorry. I'm sorry, Harry."

"WHAT...DID...YOU...JUST...DO?!?" he sputtered loudly. He was so angry with her, why did she have to ruin the only...the only, *tiny* chance he had with Cho?

"I am so incredibly sorry," Jade tried her face twisting apologetically. "Please, I just slipped—,"

"You just told her...you just told her—ARGH!"

"Calm down, Harry," Hermione said placing a hand on his arm. He brushed her away and stood glaring at Jade.

"Come on, Harry," Ron tried. "She didn't mean it."

"I'm sorry, I'll make it up to you," Jade said pleadingly. "Really, I will."

"You just told Cho I *liked* her!" Harry exclaimed.

"No...not necessary...I said you didn't like her," Jade squeaked.

"Do you know how humiliated I am?" he continued enraged. "What if...What if I told Charlie Weasley that you fancied him, eh? How'd you feel?"

"I don't like Charlie!" Jade exclaimed, shocked.

"That's true," Ron said. "She fancies Bill." Jade didn't object, but her cheeks reddened.

"Are you taking her side?" Harry asked Ron incredulously.

"No comment?"

"Harry," Hermione said in her most commanding voice. "You're being childish. She didn't mean too and she said she's sorry. She can't take it back now."

"Well," Harry said, his nostrils flaring. "I s'pose if she can't even remember her parents, she couldn't possibly remember to keep my crush a secret!" That did it. Jade's face fell, and then tightened as her eyes narrowed and her face flushed.

"Harry..." she said shaking with anger and disbelief. "I didn't deserve that." And with that, she swept up the stairs, nearly knocking him to the ground as she passed.

"That was unbelievably harsh, Harry," Hermione said turning on him angrily.

"Oi! Hello!" He exclaimed. "I'm the victim here!"

"You're being so self-centered right now!" Hermione yelled back. "You're being such a...such a...a guy about this!" She huffed and made her way up the stairs, Harry gawking after her.

"Ron! Are you coming or not?" she called half way up. Suddenly a look of fear fell on Ron's face. His gaze traveled from Harry to Hermione as if having a mental struggle about who to be loyal too. Hermione glared and he practically whimpered.

"Come on, Harry," he finally managed weakly. He cast an apologetic look at Hermione before he turned Harry round. "Let's go see the house elves about some sweets."

## 17. A Summoning

She was there again. Standing before a torch-lit cavern, looking uncertainly at a beautiful gold sword laid out on a platform, its only jeweled decoration was a single lucid green stone in the hilt.

"Mum?" Harry murmured looking from the image of his mother to the sword, which gleamed so brightly it hurt his eyes. She ignored him and entered the room just as before. Shakily, Lily examined the cavern, before reaching out for the blade.

"Oh well," she muttered. "Can't live without risk." She grabbed the hilt and lifted it, gasping at how light it was. She brought the blade down and its movements were more like that of silk than metal. Her image began to fade like so many times before and Harry could only watch as the string of dreams began to loop themselves. He didn't understand...didn't even know how seeing any of these images were possible. Was it a memory, possibly from his parents? Or were they a product of his imagination...a very vivid product that didn't lose its vibrancy as time wore on. He wanted the dream to move forward...to the time he had dreamt about the Guardian...and his mother possibly seeing him. But as dreams do, they just faded away until there was nothing left but the unconcerned snores of his roommates. Harry's eyes flitted open and he lay there in the chorus of breathing and nighttime shifting of sheets. Taking pains to not make a sound he crept towards a pitcher under one of the windows and poured himself a goblet full of water. He sipped it as if contemplating its flavor.

He stood there for a long stretch of time, wondering about what had sparked the reappearance of the dreams, questioning why he had yet to tell anyone, not even Ron and Hermione about them. He quickly answered himself. After the consequences of last year's events, Hermione looked ready to rush Harry to Dumbledore if his hand moved even remotely near his scar, and if Ron received wind that Harry may be in danger he'd turn into an irrationally concerned bodyguard. On top of that, there was still a considerable handful of students that skirted around him in the halls, as if afraid he would snap, engulfing them in a mad, angst-driven, blaze. Harry wasn't willing to change how well things were going in return for a couple of knitted brows, tight lips, and dream interpretations, especially because he wasn't sure about the meaning of the dreams himself. That is, if they had a meaning at all.

And then there was that jade pendant; he could barely recall that dream now, having had it so long ago. He did however remember, with a flop of his stomach, the uncanny resemblance of the necklace his mother had taken in his dream and the one hanging around Jade's neck. At the thought of Jade, his stomach plummeted several more feet. It had been over a week since Jade's tactless announcement to Cho that he liked her, and he still couldn't bring himself to forgive her for it. But why he couldn't was beyond him...though deep down he knew just as much as Hermione and Ron that he was being stupid.

There was actually a point when he wanted to forgive Jade...and apologize too. It wasn't until a few days ago, with Hermione constantly on his case, did he actually remember what he had said to her. If that fateful night near the Great Staircase were a boxing match between Jade and himself, he would have been pulled out of the ring for one hits too many below the belt.

"I s'pose if she can't even remember her parents, she couldn't possibly remember to keep my crush a secret!"

Hearing his own voice in his head repeat that line made his insides churn. It was beyond harsh; for one, he shouldn't be one to talk about parents, and two, in Jade's case, it was more than an insensitive comment. He had been cruel. Jade had tried to apologize for spilling the beans for the second time a few nights ago, obviously trying to hide her own anger at him, but he had once again remarked gracefully with something along the lines of "Being sorry never fixed anything" before stalking off. He really did want to forgive her, and ask for her forgiveness in return, but whenever he thought about it, all he could see was Cho at flying lessons four days ago, making every effort to avoid him, and he was angry again.

"That's not fair, you know," Hermione had stated firmly as she sat with him and Ron on Thursday in the Common Room. "Making Jade suffer like that...over something like a crush." Harry knew it, but if being logical were his only means of survival, he'd be dead. Life seemed to be riddled with irrational emotion, and there was nothing Hermione could fix about that.

Harry sighed and stretched, feeling any desire for sleep slip away from him. Maybe he should ask Sirius for advice, condolences, anything. Sure Sirius didn't exactly embrace Jade, but maybe he could pound some logic into Harry, maybe help him realize that in ten years he'd look back on that moment and laugh. After reliving the ultimate humility of it all, of course. There was no point in trying to go back to sleep, and he hadn't written to Sirius in a while. Deciding on going to the owlery to send the letter via one of the school's barn owls, Harry grabbed a bit of parchment and a quill, his glasses, and after a moment's consideration, his father's Invisibility cloak.

He slipped from the portrait hole and swept the cloak around him, watching his body disappear in the flickering candlelight. As he walked, he was already formulating the letter in his head, using the peace of the dark and empty halls as a catalyst for his thoughts. He was climbing the hidden staircase that led to the upper floors when voices floated to his ears through a tapestry on his left.

"I haven't been summoned for several weeks," Snape was saying in quiet agitation. "This could be an unexpected step backwards."

"Or it could mean Voldemort's movement have been constricted," the Headmaster's voice replied. Harry's breath caught in his throat and he nearly dropped the quill and parchment. He inched forward to peak through the tapestry that happened to be near Dumbledore's office.

"Sirius has sent word that Voldemort's inner circle of Death Eaters remain in Bulgaria," Dumbledore was saying with a nod at Snape whose face grew grim at the mention of Sirius's name. "For now let us worry about what Voldemort's intentions are...whether they still involve this Guardian."

"Somehow he's received word that evidence of its existence has been proven false and it has been confirmed destroyed," Snape replied. "It seems now he may be remaining within Bulgaria in search of a new plan for true immortality. However, the murders may not stop. They did finally use the Death Mark when they killed Karakaroff. That means their numbers are increasing again, they're more sure of their power..."

The Headmaster was silently surveying Snape, and Harry could almost feel the trust radiating from the aged and tall man. Snape's face tightened and he turned his gaze away from Dumbledore. Though comparable in height, the Potions Master seemed dwarfed beside him.

Suddenly a soft hiss caught Harry off guard and he struggled to remain still behind the tapestry as Mrs. Norris stalked by, pausing right in front of it. The lamp-like eyes burned into his invisible form, and the slinky gray body stiffened as she caught his scent. But to Harry's relief, the cat's attention was miraculously diverted to an adjacent hallway nearly directly in front of the tapestry Harry was hiding behind. His eyes followed the cat, heart pounding, and what he saw nearly made him cry out in surprise. Dumont was standing in the shadows, listening intently to the conversation between Dumbledore and Snape. "What's she doing here?" Harry thought shifting to watch her strained face. The cat moved towards her, meowing loudly attracting the attention of the two men. With grace that seemed foreign to her, the strange substitute seemed to disappear in the shadows, the cat following her.

“Did you hear that, Headmaster?” Snape asked peering into the hall mere feet from Harry. Dumbledore nodded and led the greasy-haired man into the darkness, and as soon as they were out of sight, Harry came out from behind the tapestry, intent on returning to Gryffindor tower. He tore as quietly as possible through the halls; avoiding the hidden staircases where Filch may be expertly haunting, considering his cat was prowling near by. Harry’s mind was racing. The Guardian...he was almost sure that was what his mother and father were after, seeing the same dreams over and over again. But if it didn’t exist, if it’s news was just a false presumption on one of Voldemort’s informer’s part, then maybe Dumbledore was right about Death Eater movement slowing down, at least for the time being. Harry crept silently through a fourth floor corridor, suddenly forgetting about writing to Sirius, or being angry at Jade. What was the Guardian? Why were his parents after it? And why was Dumont sneaking about? He was making a mental note to tell Ron and Hermione about his encounters when a hissing mewing startled him. Harry turned around to see Mrs. Norris, lamp-like eyes reflecting the flickering flames cunningly. He held his breath, and inched backwards as quietly as possible towards the end of the hall, praying the cat wouldn’t follow. She crept towards him, but eventually she paused and he picked up his pace, moving backwards in long quiet strides; he was nearly to the end of the hall where he could turn right and go up to the next floor. He was movingly quickly now, concentrating so deeply on being noiseless he didn’t have time to react to the sound of a flushing toilet when the door behind him was thrown open.

“ARGH!” It happened in a flash. He had collided with Filch who had just stepped from the boy’s toilet at the end of the hall, sending the stringy old man flying back into the lavatory’s recesses. Harry was flung forward, the cloak slipping off his body. He got up frantically, now aware of footsteps quickly heading in their direction. The cloak, Harry thought alarmed. If Filch or whoever was now charging down the hall towards him saw the cloak... Unable to pull it successfully around himself, he spotted the rows of suits of armor on either side of him. Thinking quickly, panic drying his mouth, he stuffed the cloak into the open visor of the one nearest him. Just as the last of the silvery material slipped away from his fingers, Snape burst onto the scene to see Filch stepping from the bathroom, back bent, and cursing...and of course, Harry out of bed in the dead of night. Snape’s black eyes narrowed as he crossed his arms, the black of his robes accentuating the slivers of white in his hair and the paleness of his face.

“Late night stroll, Potter?” he asked in quiet mockery.

\* \* \*

“Harry! It’s a snitch—you catch it!” Angelina hollered, her breath condensing in the cold pre-dawn air. Harry yawned and gave his captain the thumbs up, struggling desperately to concentrate on his search for a little golden flicker. The faster he caught the darn thing, the faster morning practice would be over. He had been trying to concentrate all morning, but it seemed his mind was focusing on anything but Quidditch. The foiled midnight journey earned him a delightful detention from Snape, as well as one from Filch who was seething. And he thought there was a chance of escaping his fifth year detention free. It also wasn’t helping that he got an insomniac’s amount of sleep and was practically dead on his broomstick.

Harry weaved his way around the goal posts looking down at Ron who seemed completely incapable of ever getting use to getting up before the sun did, sitting hunched over on Seamus’ Nimbus 2001. He only shook himself out of his coma to catch the quaffle sent his way by Alicia. Twenty or so feet below, Seamus circled lazily around the pitch, cautiously building speed (it was more like a very tiny acceleration from stand-still to steady crawl) on an ancient Shooting Star he had traded for his own broomstick.

A flash of gold reflected the sunrise, and Harry was off, trying desperately to focus his mind on catching it. However flickers of the conversation he overheard the night before, images of the strange dreams, and Cho’s face continue to push all thoughts of practice out of his mind. He swallowed the lump of mortification forming like a ball of solidified morning breath in his throat. After what seemed like an eternity, the call that would set all of them free was heard.

"Right, let's pack up!" Angelina yelled, the displeasure audible in her voice. "It's Hufflepuff's pitch in five minutes!" Conveniently, Harry spotted the snitch for the millionth time that morning and dove for it, catching it barely by the wings.

"Good job, Ron," Seamus said as Ron handed him back his broom. He stifled a yawn and managed a very sleepy grin. Within minutes, he and Harry were trudging back up to the castle together in the dazzling morning sunlight that had materialized around them, making the tiny clumps of residual winter snow glisten.

"Weren't you best this morning," Ron noted, rubbing a hand over his eyes.

"I didn't sleep well," Harry muttered in return. "Too busy getting detentions last night."

"What was that all about anyway?"

"I couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd send a letter to Padfoot. I got caught in the process, by Snape and Filch, no less." Ron grimaced.

"You get your cloak?" he asked.

"This morning, before practice," Harry replied. "But never mind that. I didn't get a chance to tell you about what I heard last night. I overheard Dumbledore and Snape talking...they were discussing Voldemort's movement...and that Guardian thing."

"You mean like the thing we heard Snape and Dumont arguing about before the break?"

"Sounds like it."

"You don't reckon Dumbledore's hiding this...Guardian, do you?" Harry shrugged.

"It wouldn't be a first, but then there's proof it was destroyed or something. Snape thinks Voldemort is trying to find another way to regain power and immortality." Ron's face grew pale at the mention of that name, but he had months ago stopped protesting to Harry's use of it.

"There's something else," Harry said shifting the Firebolt on his shoulders. "Dumont was sneaking around. I saw her last night eavesdropping on Snape and Dumbledore." Ron raised his eyebrows.

"You sure she was 'sneaking around'?" he asked. "Maybe she accidentally came across them talking, like you did."

"I don't think so," Harry said. "You should have seen her face, and the way she hid in the shadows. She followed them there." They silently walked the rest of the way to the castle.

There was an hour before breakfast even started so they took to the boy's bathroom to shower and dress for the day. Afterwards Harry and Ron played a few games of Exploding Snap as they waited for Hermione to appear from the staircase.

"Morning," Hermione said crisply spotting them when she had descended from the girl's dormitories.

"G'morning," they replied putting down the cards. She seated herself between them and looked pressingly at Harry. Before either he or Ron could fill her in with what had happened the night before she spoke.

"Well?" she asked quietly, raising an eyebrow.

"Well what?" Harry asked, somewhat surprised. She was staring at him straight in the eye, and he quickly looked away. Hermione had a talent of looking at someone all-knowingly and it could prove quite nerve-racking.

"Have you come to your senses about Jade?" she asked for the thousandth time that week. Ron pursed his lips and looked at her, shaking his head.

"Come off it for a second, will you?" Ron said slightly exasperated. "Harry got a detention for being out of bed last night." And before Hermione could lecture him, he and Ron burst out in a narrative of what he had overheard and saw.

“Dumont?” Hermione asked thoughtfully. “But she doesn’t seem the type to be sneaky.”

“She’s a strange one, she is,” Ron noted.

“Should we tell someone?” Hermione asked her eyebrows knitted. “The Headmaster?”

“I think he knows,” Harry replied. “He and Snape followed her and you know nothing gets past Dumbledore.”

“And this guardian thing, they say its been proven to be destroyed or non-existent?” Hermione asked sitting forward in her chair. “What is it?”

“No clue,” Harry replied.

“A little research could fix that,” she stated as her thoughts seem to finally depart from Jade and she sat silently with her arms cross, no doubt probably mapping out the library in her head. Harry was almost a little relieved that this was something new to preoccupy her with. Maybe it meant she’d give him a break about forgiving Jade.

That little bliss wouldn’t be for long. A few minutes later they were seated at the Gryffindor table in the midst of chatter and food passing. Harry ladled porridge into their bowls as Hermione again brought up Jade.

“It’s been over a week,” she said. Harry only sighed and seated himself.

“You’re being ridiculous, Harry, it was an accident.”

“One that wouldn’t happen if she cared enough about the outcome.”

“Come on, Harry,” Ron tried.

“What if I told the girl *you* liked that you fancied her?” Harry replied heatedly dropping the ladle. “You wouldn’t exactly shower me with gifts, would you?” The muscles around Ron’s jaw tightened and a tinge of pink appeared on the bridge of his nose. Seamus and Dean who were sitting nearby tried to pretend that they hadn’t heard a thing while Parvati and Lavender scooted as close as possible to hear any more dripping details.

“No,” Ron finally mustered.

“That’s still not the point,” Hermione said stubbornly. “You are being childish about this.”

“Listen,” Ron said. “If you just talk to Jade, maybe you’ll get over being so bloody angry about this.”

“You’re one to give advice on anger management,” Harry stated before catching himself and slumping in his seat. Ron’s ears reddened.

“Listen,” Harry said stumbling on the words. “You know I didn’t mean it...I didn’t sleep well and—” Jade had entered the Great Hall, rucksack slung across her shoulders. Hermione waved her over, and she obliged despite Harry’s presence.

“Hi Hermione, Ron,” she said pleasantly before turning to Harry and adding coldly, “Morning, Harry.” He grunted and Hermione elbowed him.

“I saved you a seat,” Hermione said motioning to the chair beside her. Jade smiled but shook her head.

“Actually I’m going to sit with the twins again,” she replied cheerily. “Being that my humble apologies have once again failed—” she glared at Harry “—I think it best if I don’t sit too close to a certain someone. Besides Fred and George are giving me dancing tips...the promenade isn’t too far from now.”

Jade smiled and walked away to a seat farther up the table.

“The least you could do is try, Harry,” Hermione muttered spooning some porridge into her mouth.

“She wasn’t exactly chummy with me either,” he replied in defense.

“You did blow up at her *twice*,” Ron noted.

“And if you just happen to let it go unnoticed,” Hermione added rather tartly, “she apologized the second time ignoring the fact that you said something very cruel to her.” Harry was silently gazing at the tureen in front of him having ages ago contemplated that thought guiltily. However, that guilt was quickly forgotten as he lifted his eyes and saw Cho at the Ravenclaw table. As if on cue, she raised her eyes and their gazes met before she instantly turned away, avoiding looking anywhere in his general direction for the rest of breakfast. Harry’s face burned as he twisted the napkin in his hands now wondering if it were even possible to forgive Jade.

\* \* \*

Harry yawned and tried to rub the sleepiness from his eyes as his mind drifted from their Astronomy lesson onto his many conflicts.

“If you can locate Sirius for us, Mr. Potter,” Professor Sinistra said.

“Excuse me?” he asked startled.

“The Dog star, if you were paying attention,” the lean woman replied pointing towards the heavens.

“Oh, right.”

Gryffindor and Ravenclaw fifth years huddled together in the chilly night on Hogwarts’ highest tower, attempting to locate constellations while stifling yawns and clamping shut chattering teeth.

“Where’s Jade and Neville?” Harry heard Ron mumble to Hermione as he pressed his eye against the peephole of the telescope. “Class started twenty minutes ago.”

“Detention,” Hermione answered. “Remember for melting that cauldron a week ago?”

“Shouldn’t they be done by now? I mean it’s nearly midnight.”

From the stairs leading to the top of the tower, two figures clamored into the cold night, winter cloaks fluttering out behind them.

“Sorry Professor,” Jade gasped struggling to regain a firm hold of her rucksack, which was threatening to spill its contents.

“Professor Snape—,” Neville panted. “He kept us loads longer than we expected.”

“Tosh,” Sinistra said waving away their apologies. “You aren’t the first to be late to my class...Astronomy must convene in only the most inconvenient of hours. Mr. Longbottom I’m sure Misters Thomas and Finnigan can accommodate you at their telescope. Ms Cordonnier, perhaps you may join Ms Granger and Misters Weasley and Potter?” Jade struggled over to them, dropping her bag at her feet. Harry ignored her and pretended to be involved in searching for Sirius, the Dog Star.

“Ack, what in god’s name is that smell?” Ron whispered as Jade leaned over him to glance at their assignments.

“Dragon dung,” Jade replied matter-of-factly, before cautiously sniffing at her robes. “Neville and I spent the last two hours ‘harvesting’ and stewing it for some potion or another; probably the main ingredient to Snape’s favorite cologne. What’d I miss?”

“Not much,” Hermione answered squinting up at the cloudless night sky. “We’re practicing how to map out constellation locations.”

“Great.”

“Sorry about your detention,” Hermione continued. “I hope it wasn’t too awful.”

“Oh no,” she replied sarcastically. “It was an absolute holiday. I think I would have drowned myself in the nearest number two cauldron if Professor Lupin hadn’t showed up. There for his Wolfsbane, I reckon. Blast, I didn’t even finish my chart!”

“You can copy mine,” Ron said.

"No you can't," Hermione snapped pushing Ron's chart away from Jade's outstretched fingers. "It's not too much work and you shouldn't cheat." Jade cast her a mildly reproving look, the heavy sent of dung wafting off of her.

"Fine, I'll need the telescope then," Jade replied with a sigh. "Shove over, Harry."

"No," he said still peering through the eyehole. "I'm still using it."

"No you're not. You're just using it to avoid talking to me, but I assure you if you give me a go, I won't utter a word."

"I told you I got here first."

"Harry," Hermione said warily.

"Listen," Jade hissed. "I've had a long night and detention's been rough. Can't you cut me a break long enough so I can finish this assignment?"

"Don't be so melodramatic," Harry replied evenly. "I've got a couple detentions myself."

"But you earned those," Hermione said firmly and finally Harry relented, stepping backwards and knocking over Jade's bag in the process, spilling the contents. She huffed and bent to pick them up.

"Oh no," she groaned.

"What is it?" Ron queried bending down to pick up her quills.

"My Defense study guide, the one Dumont lent me. Lupin borrowed it and didn't give it back. How am I s'pose to do my water demon essay now?"

"What would Lupin need with your Defense Against the Dark Arts study guide for?" Ron asked raising his eyebrows. "That being his field and all?"

"He said he wanted to compare his lecture notes to it," Jade replied, her voice muffled as she plunged her head into her bag in search of the book. "Me and Neville were in so much of a hurry I totally forgot about it."

"Well there's nothing you can do about it now," Hermione said helping Jade re-pack her things. "You might as well concentrate on getting this done. I wish you didn't procrastinate on that essay, but you can use my notes later."

"I thought you said no cheating!" Ron exclaimed.

"It's not cheating," Hermione insisted. "It's guidance. I'm not *giving* her my paper." Harry snorted and sketched out the Dog Star onto his chart. Jade sighed and began to peer into the telescope.

"You know Harry," she said after a while. "Snape seems to hate Lupin even more than he hates you."

\* \* \*

"I don't get it, Neville," Ernie Macmillan was saying as he stuffed moss around the peculiar mushrooms they were currently working on in Herbology later that week. "I figured someone who liked Herbology would be interested in Healing magic...it's a lot of plant work you know." Neville's face turned scarlet. Harry glanced up from his own planter of mushrooms to look at the round-faced boy. Good to his word, he had not even uttered a word to Ron and Hermione about Neville's parents.

"That besides," Ron added grabbing a handful of moss from the bucket on the table, "we get out of school for two days. What nutter would give up a perfectly good reason to skive off?"

"Yeah, and what I'd give for a day out of school," Ernie said, "even if its to St. Mungo's. I'm sure it's interesting enough, eh Neville?"

"I've seen it, thanks," he replied quietly and Harry felt that it was time to change the subject.

"Hufflepuff prepared for the match against Slytherin next week?" Harry asked.

“I think so,” Ernie said suddenly quite enthused by the topic of the match. “That McKennett, she makes an awesome captain.” Looking around, he lowered his voice and leaned towards Harry and Ron across the table. “You know she’s Cedric Diggory’s cousin, right? I think she feels it’s her responsibility to play in his memory, or something. She’s a real winner, she is. As good as Diggory himself, God rest his soul.” Harry nodded suddenly feeling as naked as Neville did when the conversation flitted around St. Mungo’s. He had yet to even meet Dina McKennett who was in Cho’s year. It was hard enough to face the Hufflepuffs everyday though they never gave him the slightest of a hard time. But he could see the accusation in some of their faces, the way they looked at him as if he would be the chosen sacrifice if they had any say in who should have died last year. And a part of him agreed with them. Ron caught his eye and Harry shook his head forcing a quick smile onto his face.

“We’ll show them up, I reckon,” Ernie said with a grin.

“You’ve got my bet,” Ron said pleasantly before trying to steer the conversation on to something else, sensing his friend’s apprehension about anything regarding the former Hufflepuff hero.

Cedric’s life and death was the main reason he had nearly no chance with Cho. He knew it, completely comprehended that. Yet he couldn’t bring himself to let Jade off the hook for blabbing. Harry looked across the tables to where Hannah Abbot, her friend Susan, Hermione, and Jade sat. It was an accident, a slip of the tongue, she meant no harm, and he had been really cruel to her in return. Jade, who was trying to up-right a mushroom she had broken, looked up and caught his eye. Her eyes narrowed, and she shot him a nasty glare. Harry’s jaw dropped. That wasn’t fair, and he feeling bad and all. Fine, he thought. If she wanted to play that game...

“All right, let’s clean it up!” Professor Sprout said, dusting her hands on the front of her already soiled skirt. They re-shelved the fungi into their dark closets and took to the exits of greenhouse number four.

Hermione joined Harry and Ron just outside doors, loosening the muffler she had wrapped around her neck.

“Remember that Guardian thing, Harry?” she asked.

“Yeah, you found something already?” he returned preparing to look impressed.

“No.”

“Loosing your touch, are you?” Ron teased. She rolled her eyes at him and continued.

“There are about a million different Guardians...the Light Guardian, the Possessor’s Guardian, the Guardian Angel, the Guard of the Grail...Snape and Dumbledore could have meant any one of them.”

“But whatever they were talking about has been destroyed or something,” Ron said. “Doesn’t that help?”

“Not in the slightest, considering many of these conjured guards have been destroyed or released of their duties. And many more are no more than myths.” Hermione sighed, looking as if her most practical resource (the library) had betrayed her.

“But Voldemort wanted it,” Harry mused.

“He can’t have it if it no longer exist,” Ron noted.

“All right Hermione?” came a voice from their left. “Hi there, Harry, Ron.”

“Hello Dean,” she replied with a smile.

“You two prepared for the Ravenclaw versus Gryffindor match in two weeks?”

“You bet your knickers,” Ron muttered scowling as the boy flashed Hermione a brilliant grin.

“Where’s Seamus?” Harry asked curiously as it seemed Dean was never anywhere without him.

“Talking to Professor Sprout,” Dean replied. “He didn’t do to well on his end of term exam. Want me to help you with those books Hermione?”

“No, that’s all right.”

“Because I’m helping her with them,” Ron nearly snapped, seizing the handful of books from Hermione’s arms. She and Harry shot him curious looks.

“Right then,” Dean said awkwardly as Hermione attempted to cast him an apologetic smile. “Anyway, Seamus is trying to negotiate a better grade. I reckon now he might not do that Healing Arts class after all. It’s got a lot to do with Herbology, you know.”

“Hey Dean! Wait up!” Seamus was flying towards them. Pausing to catch his breath he managed to gasp a quick greeting. “Come with me to Madam Pomfrey’s office, will you? I need to speak to her.”

“Yeah, okay,” Dean agreed before waving them a goodbye and following his friend towards the north entrance of the castle.

“Really, Ron, what’s the matter with you?” Hermione snapped as soon as the two boys disappeared, snatching her books from his grasp. Ron’s jaw dropped.

“You know what you have in your books?” he asked as if the answer was completely obvious. “*Notes*, Hermione. He could have just walked off with them, then flown to some desolate corner of the castle to use them for his answers.” Harry had to refrain from laughing.

“That’s ridiculous,” she muttered.

“It’s true,” Ron replied fervently. “I’m just trying to protect you.”

“From what? Imaginary cheaters? Really, Ron, you need to get out more.”

“Well that’s why I signed up for that Magical medicine thing!”

“Can’t we just let it go?” Harry asked.

“No,” Hermione snapped. “You’re still being stupid about this whole Cho thing, so you don’t get a say.” He sighed. Darn it, and he thought he’d get a whole hour without that coming up again. When they reached the common room, Harry managed to pry Hermione away from her studies, and attract Ron’s attention long enough to engage them in a game of Gobstones. Soon, friendships were restored and they spent the time curiously pondering about Snape’s missions, and Voldemort’s new goal.

At a quarter to nine that night, Harry departed through the portrait hole to serve his first of two detentions. Nothing like spending a perfectly good evening rotting away with Snape. It was then he remembered gloomily the offensive odor Jade was engulfed in after her night of detention with the Potions Master.

Harry sighed and pushed open the heavy doors of the dungeon classroom. A foul smoky odor infiltrated his nostrils and he nearly gagged on the pungent fumes.

“Good evening, Potter,” came the low, oily voice. Snape was standing over a cauldron, diligently measuring away. Harry stepped into the classroom and heard an unpleasant “squelch” as he feet made contact with a slimy substance on the floor. He made a face and attempted to detach himself from the sticky mess. Snape eyed him from behind a curtain of greasy hair.

“My sixth year Slytherins had a little accident with the stewing frogspawn,” he explained without Harry even asking. “They are most eccentric with the more....messy....ingredients.”

“I’ve got to clean this up?” Harry asked, trying to force the bitter resentment from his voice. Knowing Snape, he probably dumped the stuff on the floor himself.

“How receptive you are,” the Potions Master returned simply. “Get to it, Potter.” And he levitated a wiry brush and bucket to Harry, dropping them at his feet and sloshing cold, gray, water onto his slacks. Slightly fuming, he dropped to his knees and began to work the soapy water into the sticky cracks in the floor.

Two hours later, the cobblestone of the dungeon classroom was nearly stick-free, and Harry’s arms were threatening to fall off. Snape had said nothing to him as he was occupied with simmering the potion before him. He was just ladling some into a goblet when Lupin appeared.

“Good evening, Harry,” he said pleasantly stepping into the room.

“Hi Professor,” he replied, wiping a line of sweat from his brow with his forearm.

“Please don’t fraternize with the student being punished, Professor Lupin,” Snape said coldly pushing the goblet towards the approaching professor.

“Thank you, Professor,” he replied easily taking the goblet and lifting it to his lips. He sipped it slowly, wincing at the absolutely rancid taste, almost as if punishing himself with its flavor.

“You make it better every time,” Lupin coughed, tears welling up slightly in his eyes. Harry couldn’t help himself and choked down a laugh.

“If you’re done being amused, Potter,” snapped the greasy-haired professor, silencing him instantly.

“Sorry,” Harry mumbled returning his attention to the nearly spotless floor.

“Don’t waste your time with apologies,” Snape hissed. “I want this floor cleaned, not your half-hearted—” Suddenly his tall frame twisted and a shivering convulsion shook his body. Lupin dropped the goblet and reached out to steady him. The stemmed glass hit the stone floor with a sharp thud as Snape reached forward gripping the edge of the desk. His eyes peered like haunted pools out from the pale face, directly at Harry so that he could feel the startling terror that radiated from the man.

“Severus!” Lupin said trying to pull Snape upright. Snape’s right hand was wrapped around the thin pale wrist of his left arm. Harry’s eyes widened as the thought hit him. The Death Mark, branded into the flesh on the inside of that arm, was summoning its Death Eaters again.

## 18. Ravenclaw vs. Gryffindor

“Get out.”

“Professor, are you okay?” Harry asked standing up and letting the wiry brush drop from his hand.

“I said GET OUT!” Snape fired again, fingers digging deeper into the fabric around his wrist...into what Harry was sure was the brand of the Dark Mark. Lupin nodded at him as to encourage him to go as Snape slipped sharply away from Lupin’s steady grip. Harry let out a rush of air and turned to depart, leaving the bucket of soupy water where it lay.

“And Potter?” He paused, his hand outstretched towards the door handle.

“I suggest you keep this quiet,” Snape hissed. “Not a single word to a soul...if you want to survive this term.” Harry readily agreed, stepping out of the dungeon classroom, before darting up towards the Entrance Hall and making a mad dash up the stairs, thinking that he needed to tell Ron and Hermione.

“Ron! Hermione!” Harry yelled as he burst through the portrait hole. The several common room dwellers that were still milling about looked at him curiously. Smiling sheepishly, he slipped towards a rather private gathering of armchairs where Hermione and Ron sat waiting for him.

“How was detention?” Hermione asked calmly looking up from her book to find Harry panting, trousers soaked at the knees, and flushed.

“That bad, eh?” Ron said noticing the line of sweat that had darkened Harry’s shirt at the nape of his neck.

“Never mind that,” he replied hurriedly, sitting down between them and motioning them to move their chairs in. “The Dark Mark...the brand on Snape’s arm. It burned tonight.” A very obvious shiver shook Ron’s lanky frame as Hermione sucked in her breath sharply.

“Are you sure?” he asked quietly.

“He was summoned tonight,” Harry replied firmly. “And by Voldemort himself since he’s the only one who can call the Death Eaters through the mark.”

“But Snape’s been gone before,” Hermione said evenly though her eyes were wide with fear. “I mean off spying before...what makes it so different now?” Harry’s jaw slackened. Why *was* it different now? Because for the first time he glimpsed a bit of the pain the hated Potions Master was being put through for the good of the wizarding world. Pain...it was the most primal of all sensations, human or animal.

“Because--,” Harry began. “Because Snape said it was bad that he hadn’t been summoned in a long time to Dumbledore that night. The question is whether or not its bad he’s been called now.”  
Hermione and Ron stared at him wide eyed, neither sure what to say. Finally Hermione spoke.

“I think its time for bed,” she said.

“What?” Ron and Harry asked together in disbelief.

“Snape knows what he’s doing, there’s no use in wondering about his duties. It’s past midnight and you two have a Quidditch match tomorrow. Besides, I may be your friend, but I’m still a Prefect.”

“Match...” Ron murmured suddenly looking a million times more worried. “I nearly forgot.” Harry gulped. So had he.

\* \* \*

At breakfast the next morning, Harry forced a bite of fried tomato down his throat, making every effort not to choke on it. It was the day of Gryffindor's second Quidditch match of the season, the match set against Ravenclaw. Normally, he'd be nervous, but not ship-rocking nauseous. He was going to be competing against Cho. He didn't even want to imagine how impaired his focus was going to be out on the pitch. At least the weather was welcoming...if you were one for freezing torrents of rain and lashing winds. Harry sighed. It could be worse, right? Playing against a girl he'd been humiliated in front of in a blinding storm wasn't all that horrible. At any rate, at least the snow had melted. It was a little relieving to know that he wasn't the only one whose stomach seemed to be flipping inside out. Beside him, Ron was turning a peculiar shade of green at the sight of food.

"Nervous, Ronnikins?" Fred asked slapping his brother on the back, sending him head first into the table.

"Me, nervous?" he squeaked.

"Come on now," George added cheerfully. "We trained you well enough...at least we hope so."

"There's only one good thing about this game," Ron muttered.

"What's that?" Fred asked through a mouthful of kippers.

"No more morning practices for me."

\* \* \*

An hour later they were standing on the field with the Ravenclaw team, everyone already thoroughly soaked. The stadium was nearly completely packed despite the weather. It would take more than torrential rains to stop the stands from filling during a Quidditch match. Angelina stepped forward to shake the hand of a handsome sixth year, Danny Davies, Roger (the former Ravenclaw captain) Davies's younger brother. On Madam Hooch's whistle, they were off, shooting up into the turmoil of twisting clouds. Thanks to Hermione's impervious spell, Harry's glasses repelled the onslaught of rain, making everything, including Cho's zipping form, clear.

"Gryffindor with substitute Ronald Weasley in Keeper Position is in possession of the Quaffle!" Lee's voice boomed through the stadium. "It's sent out and intercepted by Terry Boot of Ravenclaw!" Harry circled the pitch, ducking bludgers as they flew around the players.

"Fantastic block by Ron Weasley!" Lee was yelling over the roar of Gryffindor supporters. The twins whooped and banged their clubs together. Angelina swept past Ron with a look of a proud mother on her face.

"It's sent back out...look's like Johnson's got it and she sends it neatly to Spinnet, and BLOODY HELL!"

"JORDAN!"

"I said BLUDGER, Professor!" Harry turned away from the pitch and began to look for a flutter of wings, brushing his sodden hair out of his eyes. It was then a form came streaking pass towards a point behind him. It was Cho and she had spotted the snitch. Without delay or a conscious troubled by thoughts of his crush, he dived after her. She had only gotten better this year, even faster on an appropriate broomstick. Harry had to struggle to become level with her as they rocketed around the players in pursuit of the elusive ball.

"Looks like both Chang and Potter have spotted the snitch!" Lee said. "Your broom's still better, Harry! Catch it!"

"Impartial commentating, Jordan!" McGonagall's voice magically amplified, hissed.

Whatever Harry been feeling, be it apprehension or humiliation, it was gone. Now there was only the game, in which he had a worthy challenger. The snitch slipped away and Cho blocked him off. Her eyes were narrowed against the darts of rain and before so much as a blush could reach his cheeks, she was gone.

“Spinnet makes a pass to Bell...come on...SCORE! 30 to 20, Gryffindor!” Below, the Slytherins were hissing loudly. Ravenclaw was back in possession of the quaffle and Harry was now completely capable of focusing on his search for the snitch.

“A mad block, by Keeper Weasley, but no! The quaffle’s in by Lewinski of Ravenclaw! 30 to 30...what a game!” Ron cursed loudly but was drowned out by a clap of thunder.

Something metallic flew by Harry’s face and without wasting a second to register it he was off. Cho spotted his dive and she followed, quickly reaching level with him. Together they dove and leveled off mere feet from the ground.

“Weasley, Fred or George, (I can’t tell which) nailed by a bludger!” Lee yelled as the Gryffindors groaned. One of the Weasley twins dropped from his broom and landed on the sodden ground with a splash, spraying both speeding seekers with mud. Harry frantically tried to wipe it from his glasses, but only managed to smear it across the lenses. He could only see out of one side because of it. They were nearing the end of the pitch now, and the snitch had yet to change directions. It was going to soon however, either speeding upwards or to the left or right. Cho’s mud-spattered face was contorted with concentration. Harry knew she was thinking the same thing, as she looked over at him, only visible through a clean spot on his glasses. Pick one, Harry thought. Left? Right? He watched the snitch in growing anticipation; if he didn’t turn soon he was going to hit the goal posts.

Right, he decided turning in front of Cho with barely enough room to pass her and miraculously, so did the Snitch. She followed but Harry was closer, though not by much. Her thin fingers reached out, as she began to draw level.

“Come on,” Harry urged his broom, leaning forward, wishing the rain would wash the mud from his glasses. The Snitch kept diving into his blind spot. He could feel the flutter of wings against his fingertips, along with Cho’s hand, which was getting increasingly closer to the golden orb. Sucking in a breath, he lunged forward a bit, his hand snatching wildly in the air, closing around the familiar flicker of wings. He slowed down and raised his arm in triumph.

“POTTER HAS THE SNITCH!!!!” Lee roared his voice drowned out by the exploding cheers from the stands. “Gryffindor wins another game! 210 to 60!!!!” Harry landed in a circle of his fellow teammates, and their peers began to bleed onto the field. Hands rained down on their backs and through the mass of people he could make out Hagrid doing a refrained victory dance.

“Harry, Ron, that was fantastic!” Jade said, momentarily forgetting about her and Harry’s differences.

“Thanks,” Harry said as Ron managed a lopsided grin.

“Great job, Harry!” Hermione said from beside Jade, before turning to Ron with a grin on her face. “And you were nervous!” She reached up and shook his shoulder excitedly.

“Oy!” Seamus called, struggling through the crowd towards them, Dean beside him

“Bloody brilliant playing, Ron,” he said giving the pleasantly surprised redhead a slap on the palm. “Thanks again. You have no idea how much this is helping me.” A few feet away, the two teams began to gather to congratulate each other, Madam Hooch nodding her approval at such a good display of sportsmanship.

“Thanks for the game,” Angelina was saying unable to keep the beaming smile from her face, as she shook hands with the Ravenclaw Quidditch Captain. Harry and Ron joined the rest of the team to shake with their competitors, followed by Hermione and Jade. Harry had just finished shaking hands with Terry Boot, when he turned and found himself face to face with Cho. Her eyes were red...and Harry couldn’t tell if there were tears mingled in with the rain that was streaking down her face.

“Great game,” she muttered, quickly shaking his hand and turning away, joining her teammates. The fingers on Harry’s still outstretched hand clenched as the blood rushed to his cheeks.

“Party in Gryffindor Tower,” Jade was saying to Ron as Harry turned on her.

“This is all your fault,” he said coldly and brushed past her and Hermione, tearing off his soaked cloak as he entered the locker rooms alone.

\* \* \*

After a shower, Harry, Ron, and the rest of the Gryffindor team trudged back up to the tower, everyone but Harry in a predictably happy mood. Even the weather was clearing up; the clouds were pulling apart to reveal shreds of startling blue sky.

“Harry?” Ron said quietly

“What?”

“You know I’d rather eat bubotuber puss than admit Hermione’s right, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, better find me a spoon and a huge bowl of that stuff.” Harry stopped and closed his eyes as if suddenly suffering from a migraine.

“Did you see the way Cho looked at me?” he asked simply. “Like I was a pimple on Malfoy or something?” Ron shrugged and dug a toe into the slushy ground thoughtfully.

“If she knows you fancy her and looks at you that way, maybe she isn’t worth it,” he finally replied, the first words of wisdom ever escaping from his mouth. Harry bristled, knowing Ron was right, but also knowing the anger and mortification was eating away at him...and somehow it was eating away at Cho, too. They walked the rest of the way in silence. A few minutes later, they met Hermione in the Great Hall in time for lunch, and she spent the hour lecturing Harry about Jade and friendship. He barely managed to swallow a few spoonfuls of stew between her epic rhetoric.

“Are you listening to me, Harry?” Hermione demanded as they left the Great Hall an hour later. “I can’t believe you are willing to throw away a friendship over one mistake...over one crush.

Friendships are built on forgiveness and compromise. You of all people should know that.” Harry stopped near the Great Stair and shrugged his shoulders in defeat. He knew he was being stupid, he knew it, and he was about to say so until...

“Oy!” Jade called as she marched towards them from the Great Hall. “I’m tired of this skirting business. I’ve already said I’m sorry, wallowed in my guilt, and I demand you forgive me. Then I insist you apologize *to me* for saying what you said two weeks ago.”

“What?” Harry asked disbelievingly at Jade’s shrewd bluntness.

“You heard me,” she replied evenly.

“I don’t think this is the time, Jade,” Hermione insisted firmly.

“You told Cho I fancied her!” he shot as if she needed reminding.

“On accident!” she retorted in defense.

“Well, if this isn’t an unfolding drama,” a drawling voice murmured with amusement.

“Go away, Malfoy,” Ron hissed. Malfoy didn’t budge, just stood near them, flanked by his two henchmen, sneering smugly.

“Oh dear, should I run for the hills?” he asked mockingly.

“Shut up!” Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Jade spat in unison. A small crowd was starting to gather.

“I swear I’m going to fix this so you’ll have to eat your words!” Jade shot tartly.

“Ouch, Potter,” Malfoy sneered from the sidelines. Ron growled at him as his friends continued their bickering.

“I already said I’m sorry!” Jade was saying to Harry, her voice rising.

“Calm down—,” Hermione insisted, trying to push the two away from each other.

“Well I’m sorry about the fact that you can’t remember anything, but that’s not fixing a thing, is it?” Harry exploded. Jade’s jaw dropped and her eyes narrowed.

“Excellent comeback, Potter!” Malfoy smirked amusedly. “I daresay I’m impressed.”

“Stay out of this, you—,” Ron snarled scathingly but never finished because of what happened next. In one swift movement Jade had lifted her hand and slapped Harry across the face. The gathering crowd groaned and winced as Harry’s jaw dropped. His glasses askew he looked at her in bewilderment, his face stinging. He hadn’t been that shocked since Hermione raised her hand to Malfoy. Both Ron and Hermione were goggling, dumbfounded at Jade. A few feet away, the sound of a solitary pair of hands clapping echoed through the hall

“Oh, good show!” Malfoy crowed slapping his palms together while Crabbe and Goyle chuckled away. Ron snapped out of it and turned on him.

“Didn’t we tell you to piss off?” he shouted heatedly.

“Try and make me,” Draco hissed back.

“I’ll make you,” Ron snarled, raising his wand, but Hermione reacted quickly and snatched it from his grasp. Malfoy laughed and crossed his arms, while Ron, chest heaving managed to turn his back on him.

“What, Weasley? Jealous your family couldn’t have a better row with your brother?” Malfoy asked simply. Ron’s face turned maroon to the point that even his hair seemed to darken.

“It’s not worth it,” Hermione said but the words barely left her mouth when Ron launched himself at Malfoy. “Ron no!”

Just then, Crabbe had gotten to his senses and dived on top of him. Harry burst forward in attempts to pull the boulder-like boy off, before his friend was crushed.

“Get off, you git!” he grunted as Crabbe rounded on him and threw a punch squarely in his face. With a crack Harry’s glasses broke away, cutting the bridge of his nose as stars blinked in front of his eyes. Blindly, he swung back with all the strength he could muster, sending Crabbe flying.

“Come on, Harry!” Colin Creevey cheered as he began to snap away with his camera, his brother squeaking with excitement as he danced around the throng of students. They were pressing in with interest now, cheering both Ron and Harry on.

“Break it up! Get a staff member out here, somebody! STOP EGGING THEM ON!” Hermione was yelling at the top of her lungs, sending sparks into the air.

“We’ve got to do something!” Jade said urgently, grabbing her elbow.

“Well what do you think I’m *doing* ?!” Hermione growled. Jade turned towards what now looked like a withering dog pile on Malfoy, her face set. Goyle (definitely the slower of Malfoy’s bodyguards) was watching the twisting bodies in complete confusion. In quick steps she walked up to him, tapped his shoulder and when he turned around, swung a mad right hook into his chin.

“JADE!” Hermione cried out angrily. “WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” Arms and legs were swinging madly about and Hermione grabbed her badge off her robes.

“STOP! I’LL TAKE AWAY POINTS!” she yelled shrilly brandishing her badge at the group of fighting bodies on the floor. Crabbe reached up and pushed her away, sending her sprawling onto her backside. Gasping in surprise, her face darkened and she lashed out with a solid kick to Crabbe’s head before being knocked across the face by Harry’s foot.

“WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?!?” McGonagall shrieked as she burst onto the scene. Quick as mice, the crowd dispersed, revealing seven guilty faces and tangled bodies on the floor.

\* \* \*

“In all my years,” Professor McGonagall was exclaiming, a fierce, stern look on her face. “Never had I run upon fifth year students brawling like dogs in the halls.” She was standing behind her desk; hands pressed flat against the wood, eyeing all seven of them, each of whom was bearing a battle wound.

"Well?" she finally said leaning forward so that her hands began to look like claws. "What do you have to say for yourselves?"

"We're sorry, Professor," Harry managed wincing as he gingerly fingered the bruising cut on the bridge of his nose. His broken glasses were clutched in his hand in several pieces.

"Oh I assure you, you will be, Potter," McGonagall assured him. "I know of the rivalries between Gryffindor and Slytherin...but you can not hold grudges, Potter. Look where they get you." At that Jade snorted. The Deputy Headmistress paused, raising an eyebrow at her.

"Did you want to add something, Cordonnier?"

"Just that I agree with you," she replied sheepishly, before glaring at Harry through her good eye. The other was swollen completely shut. McGonagall sighed and stared at them through her spectacles beadily, much like a vulture over a prey near death.

"None of you had the maturity to respond to Granger's command to stop, her being a Prefect and having that authority. You should be ashamed of yourselves."

"She kicked me," Crabbe stated pointing to the icepack on his head. Hermione's face turned magenta, matching the color of her fat lip.

"Is this true?" she asked looking as if she were refraining from messaging her temples.

"Yes, Professor," she murmured straightening a little. She seemed almost a little pleased by her tiny rebellious streak. There was a tick just above the Deputy Headmistress's temple, and she looked as if any more information would set fire to her fuse.

"I'm sure it was in self defense," she completed shortly. "I must say I'm disappointed by the childish behavior you all displayed."

"D'you hear that Harry?" Jade mumbled.

"I'm not being childish," he shot back.

"Will you all please act as if you are being *punished*?" McGonagall said drumming her fingers on her desk.

"Weaswee stawted it," Malfoy spat, two of his teeth clasped in his hand.

"Get stuffed, Malfoy," Harry inserted rolling his eyes.

"Quiet, all of you," McGonagall said straightening her frame squarely. "Let's get on with the punishments: thirty points from each house...and a detention for each of you, except Cordonnier. You will serve two since you are not affiliated with a house." Jade groaned and stomped her foot

"This ith injustith!" Malfoy said standing up. "Wait until I tell my father!"

"While you're at," Ron inserted wiping blood out of his eye, "you can tell your father to *bite me!*"

"Bite this!" Malfoy retorted rising angrily in his chair.

"You can't bite anything without those teeth," Hermione said as if making a valid statement in one of their classes.

"There will be NO biting whatsoever!" McGonagall hollered bringing order back to the room. "You all will report to Madam Pomfrey to get cleaned up. Expect to be notified by owl what and when your detentions shall be." She collapsed into her winged armchair folding her hands neatly onto the desk before her. All seven of them stared at her in silence.

"She kicked me," Crabbe mumbled eying Hermione.

"Mr. Crabbe," the Professor said wearily. "It's been said."

\* \* \*

"I can't believe it," Ron groaned. "Scrubbing out the boy's toilet..." His feet were sticking out from one of the stalls. Harry pushed up his glasses, which were sliding down the bridge of his nose on a film of sweat with his forearm. He sighed and ran the brush hard across a stubborn stain in the porcelain bowl he was working on. At this rate, he would need an arm transplant. It wasn't going nearly as badly though, since Filch had left them to chase down Peeves. The resident poltergeist had smeared violet pudding on every wall of the trophy room. Hardships weren't nearly as bad with a friend along for the ride.

"Yuck," Ron groaned throwing himself out of his stall, looking revolted. "We're disgusting!" Harry snorted and threw his brush down, leaning backwards to gripe with Ron.

"Could be worse," he said stretching out his legs.

"How?" Ron asked skeptically.

"We could be doing this with Malfoy and his Neanderthals."

"You gotta a point there." Suddenly Ron stood up and slammed his fist into the door of the stall, sending it crashing into the wall on its hinges. "I can't believe he said that! No one knows about Percy being...you know. His good for nothing father probably told him...as a bed time story no less."

"His family will never have as much dignity as yours, Ron," said Harry reassuringly. "He wasn't worth this detention. He isn't worth a million of them." Ron looked down at Harry appreciatively and lowered himself back down in front of the toilet he had been working on.

"Thanks."

"But it was definitely worth seeing Malfoy without his two front teeth," Harry added. "I mean come on, 'This ith injustith!' Now that was classic." They sniggered and complained for a while, ignoring their toilet duties temporarily.

"Detentions not half bad without Filch breathing down you neck," Ron said between chortles. "Hope Peeves keeps him a while." From a few floors down, a loud crashing could be heard along with gleeful high-pitch laughter.

"He will," Harry answered. "I wonder what Hermione got for detention."

"Cleaning out the records room. She has that next week."

"That can't be nearly as bad as this." Both and he and Ron looked at their respective toilets and wrinkled their noses.

"It's bad," Ron insisted. "You end up sniffing up so much dust, your boogies come out as powder." Harry laughed and returned to scrubbing. Ron followed suite.

"We really are a bad influence on her," he said, voice muffled through the stall wall. "Getting her to join a fight. She could have gotten out of this detention too, but she didn't."

"She's too dignified to lie, Ron," Harry replied dumping more *Like Magic* cleaning powder into the bowl. "Even if it'd get her out of trouble." They worked silently for a while.

"I feel kind of bad for Jade," Ron finally said. "You know she got two detentions."

"Let's just say one's for slapping me," Harry replied, feeling his face redden at the memory. How many people saw him slapped?

"You kinda deserved it," Ron said before cursing when he dropped his brush with a splash into the bowl. Harry breathed through his teeth and rocked back on his heels.

"Yeah," he admitted. "I know."

"She was just trying to repair your friendship," Ron continued. "I know she wasn't very conventional about it...storming up to you and demanding you to forgive her...but you know she meant well."

"I know," Harry mumbled. "I've been a git, I know. Its just Cho I couldn't bare having her know that I...she was with Cedric and I...I..."

"That wasn't your fault," Ron replied firmly, stepping from his stall. "You know that...but you shouldn't pin Jade for it either." Harry didn't answer.

"Harry?"

"What?"

"Did you hear me?"

"Yeah." They were silent for a while, as Ron moved on to the next stall. He paused a few times as if preparing to say something but didn't. As Harry moved to the next uncleaned toilet, he thought about just forgetting Cho. He could move on, and he'd only have to deal with seeing her for the next year. She couldn't have been crying after the game after all, probably just got mud in her eye. And he never really had a chance with her, not even last year. He didn't kill Cedric, *he* didn't cause Cho pain, and Jade didn't mean to blurt out his secret.

"We've got to clean the urinals, too," Ron's voice finally said, his words emphasized by the scratching of his brush over the porcelain surface of the toilet he was currently scrubbing.

"I gotta pee."

"What?"

"I said I have to take a pee," Harry repeated.

"Why are you telling me? Just go!"

"Just warning you," he mumbled getting to his feet, his knees popping as if he were an old man. He made his way over to the urinals and unbuckled his belt.

"I wouldn't go any further."

"ARGH!" Harry fell backwards in surprise, fumbling to refasten his belt buckle, staring wide-eyed at a gloomy faced girl who was protruding from the urinal before him.

"Myrtle!" Ron exclaimed having extracted himself from his stall. "What are you doing?! And in a *urinal*?" Harry scrambled to his feet away from the plumbing, shaking angrily.

"Have you been spying on us?" he exclaimed pushing his dark hair off his forehead.

"Of course not," she insisted looking hurt at the accusation. She floated out completely from the drain and sat in the concavity of porcelain, as if it were a chair.

"How long have you been there?" Ron asked exchanging looks with Harry. How many times they had taken a pee at those urinals....

"You make me out to be some sort of...some sort of," Myrtle sniffled and began morosely picking at one of her phantom pimples. "I'm not a pervert you know, don't flatter yourself."

"So that wasn't you in the prefect's bathroom last year?" Harry asked incredulously. He was still shaking.

"Well I can't stay in my toilet forever!" she wailed miserably. "If I wasn't in the bathroom you'd have never figure out that clue! 'Gee, Myrtle, it'd be great if you help me', but heavens forbid I accidentally see anyone nude!" Her crying became louder as massive tears began to roll down her silver face. Harry and Ron tried to calm her for fear she would flood the lavatory they were suppose to be cleaning.

"We're sorry!" Harry exclaimed. "You just surprised me! I didn't mean it!"

"Really, Myrtle," Ron added thrusting a bit of toilet paper at her. "It's good that you're getting out more." Her wailing turned into a quiet sniffling. She eyed the toilet paper looking insulted, and he quickly hid it behind his back.

"Really though," Harry said. "What are you doing in here?"

"If you must know," Myrtle said pushing her glasses up. "That girl, the one who talks to Nearly Headless Nick a lot; she forced me from *my* toilet with a spell. And after all, I did warn her not to sit down. Frightfully rude girl."

"Jade?" Ron asked. "She tried to pee in your toilet?" he sniggered despite himself.

"Yes her!" Myrtle exclaimed. "All I did was warn her not to, and she rudely 'magicks' me away. She should know nobody wants their haunt peed on. Nick goes on and on about their chats all the time—"

"Their chats?" Harry asked curiously ignoring her last comment. "About death and such?" Myrtle looked jealous that someone would be more interested in Nick's death than her own.

"Yes, and how he came about becoming a ghost and all that, s'pose she's planning on doing the same." Harry and Ron silently stared at her.

"Myrtle?" Harry asked attempting to sound sympathetic. "How *do* you become a ghost?"

"Well that's simple," she answered huffily. "You have to die."

"Well, we know that!" Ron said.

"But why do some people end up being ghost and some don't?" Harry rephrased.

"Because some people are lucky enough to be happy with their lives!" Myrtle huffed. "All ghosts are unfulfilled. The Grey Lady died without ever falling in love, Professor Binns never had a life, Nick died feeling like an outcast, and I died...well..."

"Wallowing in your own self pity?" Ron supplied helpfully.

"I DO NOT WALLOW IN MY OWN SELF PITY!" she wailed. "Just because nobody likes me, and I'm ugly, and *dead*, doesn't mean I pity myself!"

"And I don't want to be rich," Ron muttered under his breath to Harry.

"If you're going to be so rude!" she cried out sinking down into the urinal. "I'm going to go and flood my toilet with that girl on it or not!"

They took one look at each other, before scrambling out the door of the boy's lavatory. They darted through the halls towards Myrtle's toilet, hoping to spare Jade a not so pleasant surprise. However, to there misfortune, they ran straight into Filch. It looked like Peeves decided violet pudding was a good look on the cantankerous caretaker. He stood before them covered in the dessert from head to foot. Bitter and ill tempered, he awarded them an extra hour of detention, which they spent cleaning out the sinks and drains. By the time they actually got back to Gryffindor tower, the common room was deserted. Harry and Ron stumbled as quietly as possible into their dormitory where Ron only managed to take off his shoes before he was snoring. As for Harry, he was asleep as soon as his glasses were deposited on the bedside bureau only barely aware of his mental reminder to apologize to Jade.

\* \* \*

"To Lily and James Potter! May both of you have a pleasant retirement at your ripe old age!" A handsome, young Sirius raised his glass in a toast. A small gathering of friends was congregated around him, including Peter Pettigrew, Lupin, Dumbledore, a very familiar-looking couple, and the Potters, each with their own glasses raised. James was grinning broadly beside a content Lily, her belly so swollen it looked as if she were in danger of bursting. They were gathered around a table set beneath a tree. In the distance, nestled in the leaves of an inviting forest was a small, comfortable-looking house.

"*Godric's Hollow*," Harry breathed watching the scene unfold before him.

"You have served honorably," Albus Dumbledore said, clinking his glass with the Potters's with a twinkle in his eye. Harry couldn't help but grin as the dignified Headmaster was dressed in khaki traveler's shorts and a horribly loud Hawaiian shirt

“May you partake in the peaceful lives you both so deserve,” he concluded. “And may your child be spared James’s horrifying hair.” Everyone laughed clinking glasses round, James even making his untidy hair stand further on end by plunging his hand into it.

Before he could take in anymore of the pleasant party, the images changed and resurfaced like the ebbing of the sea, and it was hard for Harry to keep anything straight. It seemed that these images happened after his parent’s trek for the Guardian.

Soon a new scene was formed, Lily speaking quietly to Dumbledore.

“I don’t know how,” she was murmuring running a slender hand over her belly. “But I still feel the Guardian, even though we’ve destroyed the pendent. The Headmaster looked as if he was going to reply but Harry couldn’t hear it.

The figures faded quickly leaving him confused and curious. *The Pendent has been proven destroyed...that's what Snape said.* He wanted to know more, desperately wanted to understand, but before his curiosity could be further fanned, a new image appeared...one that made him catch his breath.

“He looks just like you, James,” Lily whispered cradling a tiny bundle in her arms.

“He has your eyes,” James replied kissing his wife on the temple. “All right there, Harry?” The baby within the bundle yawned and stretched as if acknowledging his comfort.

“It’s hard to believe you could love someone so much without even knowing him yet,” she murmured running a finger gently across the unmarred forehead of the baby. Harry moved closer, throat constricted, watching his parents. Watching them smile and laugh...watching them *love* him.

“*Mum. Dad,*” he said quietly desperately wanting to seize them and hug them, to feel the happiness radiating from them. But all too soon the image was gone.

Harry rolled over blinking away tears. Though the images confused him, even angered him a little, he couldn’t help but enjoy the life-like memories of his parents. It was only too bad they wouldn’t last longer. It seemed that dreams were short, like life itself—he swallowed uneasily—or like temperament.

\* \* \*

“Jade! Wait!” Harry hollered jostling through the crowd between classes a few days later.

“Sorry! Didn’t hear you!” Jade called back which was completely infuriating. He saw her stop Angelina Johnson for a split second before disappearing down the hall.

“Isn’t going to well, is it?” Ron noted.

“Good call.”

“You can’t just expect her to be all chummy with you, Harry,” Hermione said matter-of-factly. “Not after the way you’ve been acting.”

“I haven’t been that awful,” he said in mild defense. Both Ron and Hermione raised eyebrows at him.

“Just give her a little time,” Hermione said ignoring his comment and patting him on the arm. “Maybe she’s just waiting for the right moment.”

“What do you mean by that?” Harry asked.

“Nothing,” she said simply, stuffing a quill back into her bag. Raising an eyebrow, he turned his gaze to Ron who shrugged impartially.

They had just come back from Care of Magical Creatures where they took their first real samples of silk from the morders. Hagrid commented that they would become pretty solitary soon, meaning the silk would soon reach it’s paramount and allowing room to focus their attention on other beasts, just in time for a creatures O.W.L review.

After lunch they had their weekly Flying lessons. The weather was fantastic, showcasing a fast-approaching spring, and the grounds were quickly turning green again. Despite the handful of lessons now under their belt, Hermione still wobbled uncontrollably. Seamus had regained much of his confidence, diving around his peers and participating in every task. Most of the Ravenclaws and Gryffindors needed no help, so Harry spent the lesson hovering about and keeping an occasional eye on Hermione. He watched as Jade tossed a wooden hoop at Seamus who dived through the ring effortlessly. She clapped her hands and swooped beside him to tell him something, before darting off again. Harry had tried earlier to talk to her during the lesson but Madam Hooch had told him off for not paying more attention to a couple of Gryffindor boys who were horse playing.

“Great to see you back in the air!” Cho sang out as Seamus shot by her. Harry’s stomach had knotted itself. *It’s over*, he thought, *you never had a chance...so concentrate on fixing your friendship instead.* But he couldn’t ignore Cho laughing merrily with a group of Ravenclaws. He just couldn’t ignore her. He sighed dramatically, urging himself to remember Hermione and Ron’s words about Jade.

“Oy! Harry!” Seamus called sweeping up towards him. “Did Angelina tell you that practice has been moved to five tonight?”

“No,” he replied. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, we switched practice times with Ravenclaw. I think Fred and George talked her into it so they’d get most of Friday evening off.” At that Harry grinned.

Madam Hooch blew her whistle and the class descended towards the ground. Hermione who had only been several feet above the grass, jerkily lowered herself, nearly toppling when she landed.

“You’re improving, Hermione,” Harry heard Mandy Brocklehurst say good-naturedly, tossing her golden hair over her shoulders. “I bet Ron could help you with that landing though.” Hermione forced a quick smile that looked more like a grimace. Maybe it was the fact she managed to bare all her teeth at once that did it, but there was no mistaking it.

“Just a tad overworked,” Ron explained to Mandy helpfully.

After the class was released, Harry walked with Ron and Hermione back up to the castle. He hurriedly changed into a pair of jeans and a sweater when they reached Gryffindor tower, before darting back out through the portrait hole, nearly running Seamus over in the process.

“Hurry up,” Harry said. “Angelina will have our heads if we’re late.”

“Yeah, okay,” Seamus replied. He had one foot through the hole when he let out a loud groan.

“Blast! I promised I’d meet with Professor Sprout about my Herbology marks,” he sighed. “Listen, you go first, and tell Angelina I’ll be there in a jiffy.” He grunted and disappeared into the hole. Harry shrugged and hurried out of the castle, taking long strides down the corridors and stairwells. He passed the Weasley twins on the way out, and they promised to meet him and the rest of the team as soon as they retrieved their brooms from their dormitories. Back out on the grounds, Harry walked quickly towards the pitch, knowing Angelina wasn’t going to be happy about nearly half her team being tardy. He entered the stadium, shouldering his Firebolt to find it completely empty save one figure flying lazily about the stands.

“Jade?”

She spotted him and landed on the pitch a little harder than necessary.

“You’re right on time,” she said simply as Harry walked towards her.

“What are you talking about?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re not suppose to be flying on the pitch unless you’re on a team,” he said dully.

“No worries, I’m just on my way out,” she said, turning and walking towards the exit.

“Wait!” She stopped in her tracks; turning around so he could see her raised eyebrows.

"Have you seen Angelina?" Harry said. "The team's practice got moved up."

"Oh, didn't you know? Gryffindor doesn't have the pitch until after dinner. Ravenclaw has it now."

"What?" Harry asked, utter confusion written on his face. "But Seamus told me—,"

"Well, I best be off," Jade interrupted making her way towards the exit again. "Got to meet Hermione."

"Jade! Wait!" he called at her back, suspicion creeping into his voice. She was up to something...whatever it was, he was sure he deserved it...but he wasn't going to let her off that easy.

"I don't won't to talk, Harry," she replied, turning to reveal a wicked smile. "But I'm sure Cho does." She pointed to a girl making her way onto the opposite side of the pitch. In that moment, Harry thought his internal organs had plummeted into his shoes.

"Just talk to her," Jade said winking.

"Jade!" he exclaimed exasperatedly. He couldn't talk to Cho... all alone. Not now. Before he could dart out of the stadium, or even make attempts at fleeing, Cho had spotted him.

"Harry?"

"Er...Hi Cho," he replied shakily, struggling to regain feeling in his face. He managed a quick grin.

"What are you doing here?" She asked curiously, avoiding any eye contact. "Gryffindor doesn't have practice for three hours."

"I...er...I..." he was choking up now. *Just say something*, he thought.

"You see, Seamus told me...erm....the practices switched. But they really weren't and I think Jade did it to make me mad because I've been stupid." Harry mentally kicked himself.

"Oh, okay," Cho said, blushing deeply. He could feel his own face reddening.

"I'll...I..." Harry said turning away. "I'm going to leave now." He began trudging away, embarrassed and guilt-ridden towards the exit.

"Harry, wait!" she called. He stopped so quickly he could feel his lungs crash into his ribs.

"You shouldn't be so mad at Jade," she said. "I know that she said...you know—but it was an accident...and the problem isn't her telling...no, it's really me—but really it's all...you know?" Even if the words had been remotely intelligible, it wouldn't have mattered. Harry didn't hear one word—he was too busy realizing that for the first time in weeks, Cho was looking at him. She was still stuttering a reason for Harry to forgive Jade when he cleared his throat a few minutes later.

"You wanna race?"

"Yeah," Cho said, her face brightening. "Okay." Grinning, they rose into the air and whipped several times around the field. They raced best out of five laps. Cho won. They laughed when she did her victory lap.

"We weren't really together," she said uneasily as their chortles died down. "Cedric and me." The corners of Harry's mouth fell. He didn't say anything, afraid he'd throw up if he opened his mouth. She had brought up Cedric...no matter how many people told him Diggory's death wasn't his fault, it still sat like an overly large bezoar stone in his stomach.

"Maybe it would've been more had he not—," she struggled for the words. "But he did... and really, I think calling it a 'relationship' would be too much." She sighed and her shoulders sagged.

"But he was my friend...he was an awfully good friend." Harry hovered there in the air facing her, unsure of what to say, unsure of his capabilities to say anything.

"I'm sorry," Harry managed uneasily. She looked at him, her eyes fired up.

"I never blamed you, Harry," Cho said almost vehemently. "His death was a product of You-Know-Who's return. That's what I know." Harry didn't know where she was going with that. He supposed he should have felt a good deal better knowing she didn't blame him for Cedric's death, but he didn't."

"And when I found out you may...have feelings for me," she said quietly, breaking the silence. "I just thought about how bad that must have been for you, and I didn't know how to react. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Harry replied, clearly not wanting to talk about any of this. He couldn't bear to look at Cho now, whose eyes were getting misty.

"Harry, I feel like I don't have the capabilities of being with anyone right now," she said. "But I've been thinking maybe if I stopped being selfish and told you so, I could stop hurting you and your friendship with Jade." He nodded. It wasn't fair. He never had a chance, and in the process of fancying someone he had not only hurt himself but a friend. Suddenly the sounds of voices floated onto the pitch. The rest of the Ravenclaw Quidditch team had arrived, and luckily, Harry thought.

"You've got practice," he said forcing a quick smile onto his face before descending.

"Harry!" Cho called, flying towards him. He stopped reluctantly and turned to face her.

*Great, he thought, she's going to tell me to never talk to her again...all for my own good, of course.*

"I know it seems a while off," she said. "But if you didn't have anyone in mind as a partner...for the Promenade I mean—I wouldn't say no if you asked."

## 19. By the Name of Dumont

He was delirious. His brain had finally managed to dissolve into mush. His ears had fallen off, *something* was wrong with his hearing or his mental clockwork. Harry hovered there a handful of feet off the ground staring blankly up at Cho.

“What?”

“If you ask me to be your partner for the promenade,” Cho repeated with a grin. “I wouldn’t say no.”

Dan Davies called to her as the rest of the Ravenclaw team poured onto the pitch.

“I gotta go,” she said over her shoulder, a bemused smile on her lips, as she zoomed towards her teammates. Harry watched her go, letting the words seep into his brain.

“What?”

Eventually, it hit him and a large grin plastered itself upon his face. With heart suddenly painfully full and spirit considerably lighter than it had been in weeks, he flew from the pitch and right up to the castle doors on his Firebolt. Cho didn’t hate him, she didn’t resent him, and he’d even get the chance to take *her* to the spring promenade...Cho Chang. He dismounted and sprinted up the marble staircase towards Gryffindor tower thinking he had to tell Ron and Hermione. He refrained from singing out his good fortune to a group of second year girls who looked at him with raised eyebrows as he swept past at remarkable speeds.

“Insula Gilliganis,” he panted to the Fat Lady upon reaching the portrait hole.

“Right you are,” she said swinging the portrait open. Harry clamored through it, tripped on his robes, and found himself sprawled on top of Ron.

“OW!” Ron groaned pushing him off.

“Absolutely graceful, Harry,” Hermione said helping both he and Ron to their feet. “How’d your talk with Cho go?”

“Cho—,” Harry gasped, unable to keep the grin from his face. “She doesn’t hate me! She asked me to the ball—or rather—said I could ask her, and that she wouldn’t say ‘no’, and god, she was actually *worried* about me!”

“I think it went well,” Ron said matter-of-factly as he and Hermione shot amused glances at each other.

“And she looked right at me and was real—,” Harry continued pushing a hand through his untidy hair before pausing and narrowing his brilliant green eyes. “Wait a second, how’d you two know I was talking to Cho?” A look of realization dawned on him as he glanced around the room and saw Angelina, Fred, and George waving to him, none of whom looked remotely prepared for a practice. Nearby Seamus flashed him a thumbs up from a table where he was playing chess with Dean.

“You all devised this scheme?” Harry breathed disbelievingly. “You all tricked me onto that pitch on purpose so that I’d meet up with Cho?”

“Actually it was mostly Jade’s idea,” Hermione said. “We’re just accomplices.”

“Took her the most part of the past few days to get it going,” Ron added. “Ever since she convinced Cho she and you needed to have a talk. I think Jade just wanted to give you two a nice little opportunity.”

“Jade,” Harry breathed, eyes dancing around the room until he spotted her sitting sloppily in an armchair, poking at a handful of gobstones. He marched over, Ron and Hermione right behind him.

“Finally,” she said not looking up from the marbles in her hand as they approached. “Took you long enough. So how’d it go?” Harry didn’t say anything, just stood there, face completely devoid of any emotion. Suddenly a very happy, crooked grin appeared on his face.

“Really, really, really well,” he exclaimed. “I—thanks.” Jade didn’t answer and Harry turned to look at Ron and Hermione for help. Hermione prodded him hard in the ribs, conveying the fact that he should apologize.

“Jade,” Harry started again. “I’ve been really horrible and...and mean—,”

“Don’t forget childish,” she inserted.

“—And childish, but I’m very truly sorry, and I hope I can make it up to you. I’ve wanted to apologize for days now—,”

“Oh, I know,” Jade replied matter-of-factly.

“And if it weren’t for you—,” he paused and raised an eyebrow. “What?!” Jade was grinning at Ron and Hermione who both looked as if they were trying to stifle snorts of laughter.

“I stopped being angry with you since the brawl in the Entrance Hall,” Jade explained.

“But you were avoiding me!”

“What’s the fun in getting an apology if I can’t torture you a little?” Harry looked incredulously from her, to Hermione, to Ron.

“Don’t look at us,” Ron said in defense. “It wasn’t our idea.”

\* \* \*

For the first time in several weeks, they all walked to the Great Hall together. Lavender and Parvati exchanged whispers as they sat down, obviously trying to conjure up reasons for the newly subdued tempers. They greeted those nearby and when the food appeared before them, their meal happily commenced. Ron spoke contently about his renewed respect for sleeping, as he was now free of morning practice.

“I think a little discipline and lack of leisure is good for you,” Hermione said, gracefully sipping from her goblet.

“Speak for yourself,” Ron said indignantly.

“I thought you wanted to be a Beater next year,” Harry interjected. “Morning practices aren’t going to disappear you know.”

“Ron believes in wishful thinking,” Jade inserted with a grin.

The plates cleared and Harry walked Hermione, Ron, and Jade back up to the common room, waving to Cho on the way up the marble staircase. He fetched his broom once more and joined Angelina and the rest of the team for their actual practice session.

Angelina released them early, thoroughly elated that Seamus had more than returned to his former Keeper glory, and pleasantly surprised by Harry’s renewed enthusiasm for snitch hunting. Showered and dressed he returned to the common room to find Hermione, Ron, and Jade pouring over a chess board....Jade and Hermione versus Ron.

“Okay, are we sticking with plan A or B?” Jade murmured to Hermione.

“Plan B,” she answered from the corner of her mouth, her brows knitted.

“Right, that’s the one where we move the queen and bishop out early.”

“No. But Shhhhhh! You’ll give away our strategy!”

“Sorry.” Jade sat silent a bit as Ron yawned smugly at them. “We should just move out the king.”

“That’s reckless!” Hermione hissed.

“Sorry to intrude,” Harry said announcing his arrival. He leaned his broom against an armchair nearby and plopped down into it.

"Oh you're not intruding, Harry," Ron said as Hermione and Jade ultimately decided on a move, directing their queen diagonally across the squares. "We're just finishing."

"What are you talking about?" Hermione asked raising an eyebrow. "We've just started this game." Ron commanded his chosen piece forward.

"Checkmate." Jade and Hermione simply gawked at the board as their king threw down its minuscule crown. Harry couldn't resist chuckling, quite amused.

"Two more victims to the treacherous four-move checkmate," Ron sighed dramatically, commanding the pieces back to their respected positions. "Brutal game, chess."

"I think I hate it," Jade said simply standing up and stretching. "Got the time, Harry?"

"Yeah, it's nearly nine," Harry replied glancing at his watch. Her face fell.

"Blast, I'm going to be late for my detention with Professor Lupin."

"Professor Lupin?" Ron queried. "That can't be too bad."

"It's pretty bad," she replied making her way towards the entrance hole. "I've got cage cleaning duties. Those grindylows are considered dark creatures because of their wicked bowel movements." Harry and Ron sniggered as Hermione rolled her eyes. "You'd think they have a diet of swamp fungus."

"They do have a diet of swamp fungus," said Hermione pointedly. "Wait, I'll walk you part way."

"Where are you off to?" Harry asked.

"I've got a date with hoards of dusty records," Hermione replied adjusting her Prefects badge. "My detention with Filch."

Shortly after the girls left, Ron and Harry involved themselves in a massive game of Exploding Snap led by the Weasley twins and Lee Jordan. An hour into play, and the crowd was singed and snorting with laughter as Harry (under Ron's encouragement) bewitched the logo to read "Exploding Snape". Neville turned out to be the closest thing to a winner as he successful maneuvered through the game retaining most of his eyebrows. In celebration, George set off some "improved" Filibuster Fireworks.

After most of the decks were destroyed (save several surviving cards still reading "Exploding Snape" on the backs) and the room had somewhat cleared of the smoke and sparks, most of the Common Room's numbers began to dwindle as nearly all of the Gryffindors began to disappear up to their dormitories.

Harry and Ron had a pleasantly lit corner to themselves, and they sat amusedly talking about girls who had suddenly looked very enticing this year, quidditch games they wished they could go to, and bizarre freak accident they hoped to see involving Malfoy. As they spoke Ron flipped through *Flying with the Cannons* for the millionth time while Harry started a letter to Sirius whilst they waited for Hermione's return. The letter was getting lengthy as he hadn't received or sent a proper parchment of correspondence since January, and as it was March, he had lots to fill in his godfather with. Harry was worried because of this lack of writing, but understood that the frequency of their correspondence had always rather been on the low side, as being on the run constituted one's avoidance of public post offices.

He had already written about his anxieties about upcoming O.W.L.s and end of term exams, the past quidditch game, his good luck with Cho, along with his fight and its resolve with Jade. He paused, wondering if he should include the strange dreams...wanting to know if any of it actually happened...whether his mind was capable of such fully dimensional, unconscious images.

"You think so, Harry?" Ron asked whipping him from his thoughts.

"Sorry?"

"I just said 'Maybe this upcoming Promenade thing won't be so bad if we go with partners we'd actually have fun with'."

“Oh yeah, sure,” Harry quickly replied, rereading bits of his letter.

“What is it?” Ron asked curiously. “Writer’s block?”

“No I just...” Harry said vaguely before grinning and rolling up his letter. “Nothing. Just wondering if I made it long enough. Me wanting to give Pigwigeon a hard time and all.”

“You want to send it now?” Ron asked getting up. “Pig’s hanging around in our dormitory tonight. We should get rid of the git if we want any sleep later.”

“Actually—,” Harry started a bit awkwardly but was saved from declining when Hermione, covered from head to foot in chalky dust burst into the room.

“Harry, Ron!” she gasped hurrying towards them, engulfed in what looked like a gray cloud. Ron sneezed rather uncontrollably as she reached them, covering his nose and mouth with one hand and fingering her now dust-covered hair with the other. She brushed his hand away, looking at the two with wide eyes.

“Look what I found!” From her pocket she extracted a folded page and unfurled it under their noses sending Harry into a hacking fit from the dust that rose from the paper. Eyes watering, he took it from her.

“I found it while I was reorganizing the Records of Prefects,” she explained.

“Hermione! You’ve just vandalized school property!” Ron exclaimed amusedly despite the look of urgency on her face. “I’m in shock as to what to say!” She scowled at him as if challenging his sarcasm. It wasn’t the first time after all...

“Just look at it,” she insisted pushing the page closer to Harry’s face. Across the top of the paper was a date written in a scrolling script, making the record fifteen years old. Below that were two photos: one a handsome boy no older than themselves with neat blond hair and piercing gray eyes, the other a girl with curly gold locks and the same eyes, which peered pleasantly from a round face, behind oblong frames.

“The girl...” Harry breathed. “She isn’t Professor Dumont...is she?”

“The resemblance is uncanny,” Ron muttered peering at the page from over Harry’s shoulder.

“Look at her *name*,” Hermione pointed out.

Harry’s eyes traveled down to a list of information under the girl’s photo. It read ‘Darcy Price’. Ron choked and pointed at the name written under the boy’s picture. It was the Ministry official, Logan Price.

“She’s not his sister!” Harry exclaimed looking from the names to the photos, seeing the eerie resemblance of the two teenagers.

“More like his twin,” Ron noted pointing out their identical birth dates printed below.

“But then why is her name Dumont?”

“She isn’t married, is she?” Ron asked taking the page from Harry’s fingers and examining it closely.

“She hasn’t got a ring,” Hermione said. “But never mind that. They were the only students to transfer out of Hogwarts that year.... in fact they were the only students to transfer and not return to the school in over a century. Filch told me when he caught me looking at it. They transferred out of Hogwarts, the safest place in the world during Voldemort’s heyday, when hundreds of students struggled to find a way in.”

As Hermione spoke, Harry read the rest of the information listed below each picture. Both were Prefects, Gryffindors, and students with top marks fifteen years ago. He trailed down the list of achievements, the classes taken, the request for transfers...and then the reasons for transferring...

“Family tragedy and mental trauma,” Harry read quietly. Then he remembered the words of Price as they waited before the gargoyle that guarded Dumbledore’s office. *It must be hard for you...my parents were killed by powerful magic too.*

“Their parents were killed that year they left,” he said remembering the broken look of the young Ministry Head.

“I’m willing to place my bet on that,” Hermione replied. “But I’m curious as to why they hate each other...do you remember how coldly Dumont regarded Price when we accidentally stumbled upon that meeting last November? And why would they not want the fact that they are related—are *twins*—to be known? And don’t you think it strange that—”

“—That they could be so against each other yet have the same convictions about Jade,” Ron completed quietly.

\* \* \*

Later, Harry had added their finds on Dumont and Price to his letter to Sirius, placing it aside as he still questioned whether or not he should include summaries of his dreams. However, when the letter was put away, his thoughts drifted back to the strange case of the on-hand substitute and the young Ministry Head. As Ron’s snores began to mingle with the steady sounds of slumber from their dorm mates, he thought about how impossible it seemed for a brother and sister to part their ways so violently. He, who had no one for most of his childhood, had more than once, longed for a sibling to share the pains of being alone with, to eliminate the hollowness it bred entirely. How much brighter those days under the cupboard would be, just a little more cramped with the company of someone of common blood...of common tragedy. He knew he was lucky though to have Hermione and Ron by his side, Sirius to constantly worry and care about him, as well as the gentle guidance of Hagrid and the wisdom of Dumbledore. But if losing his parents so young that he could not even remember them was so difficult, how much more painful was it to lose them after knowing their character...their love? And if they were stripped away from you, why would you cut ties with the only other person that could possibly share that pain...a sibling?

For a long time he thought of these things until at last, the fingers of drowsiness inched their way around his brain. He fell asleep, dreaming of his own parents.

\* \* \*

A soft humming floated to Harry’s ears through the fog: a beautiful sound yet neither heavenly nor remotely remarkable. The aimless tune called to him, pulling him towards another possible instant in his parent’s lives. The fuzziness began to clear and he saw his mother dressed in muggle dungarees, humming a pleasantly lilting melody to a baby in her arms, as she sat beneath a willow tree. Little arms reached up from the bundle to grasp at her fiery hair as his father approached from the back door of the comfortable house, nestled in Godric’s Hollow. Harry nearly forgot to breathe as he slowly walked towards the smiling couple. Unhurriedly, he knelt before them, eyes transfixed on the two people he had never known.

“He’s getting so big,” Lily noted tickling the giggling, baby Harry.

“Strapping lad if I do say so myself,” James added humorously. “He already looks like he’s built for quidditch. Right Harry? You ready for your own broomstick?” The baby grinned toothlessly and Lily laughed and pushed her husband away.

“How ‘bout teaching him to walk before you train him to play for England?”

“Codswallop!” he said with a mock frown, poking Lily in the ribs. “You don’t need to know how to walk to fly!” Harry didn’t even realize he was laughing along with his parents who couldn’t even see him, and before he could truly bask in the moment, the image changed to another pleasant day...this time a cozy Christmas before a fire, his baby self tinkering away at some oddly shaped blocks. Another image, a chilly autumn on the veranda where baby Harry was fast asleep as James and Lily spoke and sipped butter beer. And then...

“To Lily and James Potter! May both of you have a pleasant retirement at your ripe old age!” A handsome, young Sirius raised his glass in a toast. It was the dream showcasing a small party gathered beneath a tree including Peter Pettigrew, Lupin, Dumbledore, a very familiar-looking couple, and the Potters, each with their own glasses raised.

“You have served honorably,” Albus Dumbledore said, clinking his glass with the Potters’s, dressed in the comical Hawaiian shirt.

*But served what? Harry thought.*

“May you partake in the peaceful lives you both so deserve...and may your child be spared James’s horrifying hair.” The last time Harry had seen this image, it had ended here, but tonight, the scene continued to play.

“I can’t believe you two are retiring on us,” Lupin said good-naturedly.

“They won’t be retired for long,” Sirius insisted sipping from his glass. “They’ll be sick with boredom and *begging* to come back to the field, you mark my words.”

“Not on your life,” James laughed. “We’ll be getting the Longbottom’s company in the world of retirement before long, right Frank?” Lupin and Sirius raised eyebrows at the familiar looking couple Harry had noticed earlier.

“We’ll be one Longbottom more in a matter of months,” Frank announced kissing his wife. “And soon our savings will provide us a nice old folk’s nest, just like Lily and James here.” The small crowd cheered and congratulated them as Harry’s eyes suddenly widened with the beginnings of an epiphany. Those were Neville’s parents...Neville’s parents, who were now trapped within their own minds at St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies...Neville’s parents who were tortured to the point of unmatched pain and broken sanity...Neville’s parents who were—,”

Harry awoke with a start, unaware of any of the drowsiness that had swept him away to his dreamland. *And in the end we chase dreams for answers*, Price had said to him, the words now reverberating inside his head as he grasped at answers in his own dreams.

*Neville’s parents who were Aurors. Crouch Jr. disguised as Moody had told him so.*

He breathed in sharply, reaching for his glasses, snatching up the rolled letter to Sirius and fumbled to dip a quill into a jar of ink. *We chase dreams for answers*. Harry hastily scratched out two sentences across the bottom of the parchment.

*Were my parents Aurors? Is that why they died?*

\* \* \*

Several days later, Harry, Ron, Hermione and Jade were lounging in the courtyard during break, awaiting the bell signaling the start of their Defense lesson. Potions and Defense Against the Dark Arts earlier in the week had once again been a flurry of undeterminable directions as neither Snape nor Lupin was present, meaning Dumont had charge of both classes. She only managed to direct the students somewhat successfully in a preparation of a very weak euphorium draught (it’s effects couldn’t cheer up a child with hoards of candy at a carnival). Today, after just escaping Charms, they spoke of Dumont’s uncanny ability to fall short in instruction.

“Amazing how lacking she is in the common sense department,” Ron said stopping himself before he could drag the conversation any deeper into Dumont’s connection with Price. All three of them had agreed that Jade didn’t need to be further reminded of the fact that there were people at Hogwarts that wanted her out.

“But when it comes to demonstrations in Defense Against the Dark Arts,” murmured Hermione. “She’s absolutely brilliant. She’s not a great teacher...but she must be incredibly intelligent to focus her spells so.”

"I kind of hope Snape comes back soon, though," Jade admitted. "I actually want to learn something in Potions for a change...considering O.W.Ls are right around the corner." Ron and Harry groaned. "At least I've got this to prepare for the Defense exam." With a grin she pulled out the batter study guide Dumont had given her, the curious splash of browned crimson flashing on the cover.

"You got it back," Hermione said.

"Yeah," she replied opening the book. "Professor Lupin gave it to me last night, said he was sorry about keeping it so long."

"Anyway, Harry, have you gotten a reply from Snuffles yet?" Ron asked after several minutes of complaining about the up and coming O.W.Ls. Harry suddenly adverted his eyes from his friends, concentrating on a scuffmark on his shoe.

"No," he replied. He hadn't even told Hermione and Ron about his dreams. Mostly because he felt they were lacking in importance to anyone other than himself, but now more and more because he didn't want to voice his fear that the dreams meant nothing. And the revelation of his parents' careers...what if they were wrong? He was saved from further questioning when Jade spoke, eyebrows knitted as she flipped through the study guide.

"That's queer," she said running a finger down the Table of Contents. "Refresh my memory and tell me what comes after twenty-three?"

"Twenty-four?" Harry said inquisitively.

"That's what I thought, so why is chapter twenty-five after twenty-three?" Hermione took the book from Jade and glanced down at the page, Ron looking curiously at it over her shoulder.

"It looks like there's a chapter missing," she muttered flipping through the book. "And so are the pages that accounted for it."

"That's odd," Jade said. "I could have sworn I marked that chapter. It was after I just got it...I swear chapter twenty-four was about Manifested Powers and Dark Existences."

"Maybe you looked at it wrong," Harry suggested.

"Yeah, maybe."

The bell rung, signaling the end of their break and they departed towards their Defense class, Jade stuffing the book back into her bag.

They entered the classroom and chose seats near the front next to Neville, curiously glancing at what looked like a large pile of wooden swords on Lupin's desk. Their professor was in conversation with Dumont when the bell rang.

"Good morning," Lupin said, Dumont pleasantly beaming at them. "Our lesson today deals with the very point of Defense Against the Dark Arts. I trust we all know where the heart of this class lies?"

"In one of those tanks by the window?" Ron quipped. Lupin grinned and shook his head as Dumont chuckled beside him.

"Thank you Ron," he said. "Anyway, in case it was never mentioned, the heart of learning Defense Against the Dark Arts is frankly...defense." The members of the class stared at the two instructors, several with raised eyebrows. "Let me elaborate. You have spent most of your first three years discussing Dark creatures and history, but from your fourth year on, the time is spent on actual methods of defense. One must learn to use their magic as armor as the time may one day call for it."

"Are we dueling today?" Hermione asked excitedly, flipping to a chapter on blocking spells.

"Yes, but not conventionally. I think Professor Dumont here might be able to explain today's lesson."

"Oh right," she said suddenly pulling herself straight, sending her glasses askew in the process. She fumbled with what looked like a leather sheath at her side and at last, with a firm pull, a silver sword was extracted from its protective confines.

“This—,” she said swinging the sword over the heads of several girls who squealed and ducked the passing blade. “—Is *Deus Deceptor*, my trusty sword.” The girls peeked over the edge of the desk with fear as Hermione cast Ron and Harry a worried look. Lupin however didn’t look strained in the least by Dumont’s possession of a potentially deadly weapon.

“Now in order for a person to be quick-witted in dueling,” she said, taking the simple, cross-shaped hilt in both hands. “They must duel with reflex-like movements. This is where the swords come in. I’ve found through my studies that one trained to duel first by swords, can better control the direction and potency of their hexes.”

“A demonstration then?” Lupin said stepping forward and asking everyone to get up from their seats. With a wave of his wand, the desks were pushed against the wall. He then grabbed a rusted sword that was leaned up against the chalkboard, smiling broadly at Dumont. A cool breeze from the window lifted a bit of the brown and gray hair from his forehead. He swung the sword in a fluid circular movement, throwing it up and catching it left-handedly.

“Whoa.”

“Wild.”

Murmurs of excitement rolled through the students as they sat on the desks, watching the two professors exchange cordial words while crossing their swords. The sharp look of concentration had returned to Dumont’s face as she took the first swing, making Hermione gasp. Ron and Harry cheered as Lupin made a quick forward movement, involving what looked like a complicated turn.

“Now, if you’ll pay attention,” he was saying as he blocked a swift stab by Dumont. “You must watch your opponent’s chest, right between the shoulderblades. The arms can fake, whereas the chest can’t...that’s easy to forget when wand dueling.” He lunged forward knocking another stab from her aside. She danced away and attacked again with swift accuracy. The metal clanged from the sharp contact, and Harry and Ron began to cheer louder with much of the class, as if they were viewers at a medieval tournament.

“It’s my turn,” Dumont hissed so dangerously, Harry stopped cheering and raised his eyebrows at Ron. As Ron returned the confused look, the woman professor pounced violently so that her’s and Lupin’s swords were crossed, Lupin’s face suddenly twisted in consternation.

“Enough,” Lupin said firmly, so quietly that only Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Jade heard as they were nearest the dueling pair. With a simple spin of his weapon, Dumont’s sword clattered to the ground at their feet. Her chest was heaving and there was a bit of a crazed look in her eye...it was then he could see clearer than ever her similarity to Logan Price. It happen so fast, Harry wondered if he saw it at all, but all of a sudden she was smiling brilliantly, clapping and thanking Lupin for the duel. Lupin didn’t look as if he noticed anything peculiar, thanking her in return as he began to hand out wooden swords.

“Simple blocks today,” he announced, pairing them up. “Use both hands, just as we’ve demonstrated.” Ron and Harry ended up together and despite any of their ill feelings toward Dumont, they grinned at each other. In what other class were they ever going to get the chance to sword fight? Lupin handed Dumont back her sword and they demonstrated a handful of basic blocks. Without much insistence, the class began.

“You swing like a girl,” Ron commented with a grin as Harry swung his wooden sword at him.

“You can’t swing at all,” he replied smugly as he ducked a blow from Ron. They couldn’t help dissolving into laughter as Parvati squealed and took a running dive behind one of the desk.

“Come back!” Jade said. “I’m not going to hit you! I’m just going to swing at you a bit!”

“Jade, how about working on those blocks?” Lupin interrupted, coaxing Parvati back into the ring of duelers. Hermione cast her a look and blocked a blow neatly from Lavender. The rest of the class went as so, and perhaps it was a good thing it eventually ended early, as it began to get rowdy near the end of the hour, when Harry and Ron managed to snap each other’s swords.

“That can’t be good,” Harry said wide-eyed examining the hilt in his hand.

In the end, the class reluctantly returned the swords, begging for another lesson in weapon dueling...except Parvait who had exclaimed that Jade was a madwoman with a stick and demanded a new partner.

After lunch, where they shared their experience to especially jealous sixth and seventh years who had seemingly missed out on such Defense fun, Harry lead Hermione, Jade, and Ron to Potions. They seated themselves in the middle of the class, hoping to blend in with the surrounding Gryffindors. The bell rung and a figure in a billowing cloak swept into the room, dark circles making his eyes seem sunken.

To Harry's dismay, the newly returned Potions Master stopped beside him in the aisle.

"For you, Potter," he said in a punctuated hiss, dropping a letter in front of him. Then, leaning so close to Harry's ear his sour breath burned, he added, "If you open it in my class, I will read it out loud so that every student will know." Snape walked to the front of the class and swung around, the cloak creating a swirl of black clouds.

"What are you all waiting for?" he said his low voice reverberating through the dungeon classroom. "Invitations to get your cauldrons prepared?" With quick haste they all prepared their cauldron for potions work. Snape gave them instructions, but not without first deducting ten points from Gryffindor because Seamus had forgotten his book.

"Hoping Snape would be back, eh?" Ron muttered to Jade who was sitting beside Hermione across the aisle.

"I never denied I have brain damage," she insisted, working on skinning a shrivelfig.

"What did Snape give you, Harry?" Hermione asked quietly from the corner of her mouth.

"A letter," Harry whispered back. "I think it's from Sirius." At the moment, he was happy Snape had returned because he had returned with a letter from Black. Harry was dying to open it, but refrained for fear Snape would keep his word.

Well into their assigned Erumpent potion, Dumont appeared in the classroom, her glasses flickering in the torch fire. Snape looked up from his paper work, appearing bedraggled and irritated by her presence. She smiled unconcernedly and made her way towards him, casting a glance at Jade as she passed.

"Just wanted a word," she explained before lowering her voice so that only she and Snape could hear. Dumont pushed several bits of parchment towards him, and several times cast inconspicuous glances at Jade.

"What?" Jade hissed to no one in particular. "Is there something green in my teeth?" She was slicing her shrivelfigs now, not even realizing that her knife didn't even graze the pear-shaped vegetable. Hermione, Ron, Harry, and she continued to watch the professors in their conversation.

"What are they talking about?" Hermione muttered.

"Whatever it is Snape doesn't look happy," Harry replied quietly.

"He's never ha—," Jade was whispering. "OUCH!" Her knife dropped with a clatter as blood poured from the slit webbing between her thumb and forefinger. She winced, staring at the stream of blood making its way down her forearm in fascination.

"A dunderhead move, Cordonnier," Snape said dangerously standing up. Before he could fully erect himself however, Dumont had practically flown to Jade's side, roughly grabbing her bleeding hand.

"Let go," Jade said surprised.

"But..." Dumont breathed shallowly, her eye's fixated and strange as she swept her fingers through the crimson trickle on Jade's hand, examining the fluid on her fingertips. Hermione was trying to pull the girl's arm away, attempting to place a crumpled paper towel over the cut, but Dumont resisted.

“Darcy,” Snape said warily stepping up behind her. At last, Dumont blinked, her face relaxing, and she hastily pulled herself away. Hermione, Harry, Ron, and Jade were staring at her in disbelief. Harry began to wonder whom the records Hermione had taken referred to by the words “mental trauma”. Could it be that the young woman who stood before them was crazy? The way she had just reacted, Harry thought, it was neurotic...yet it was just how Price reacted to Jade’s tears several months before. He looked towards Snape, expecting some sort of reprieve for Dumont’s behavior, but the Potions Master only stared at the puddle of blood that had formed between some skinned shrivelfig and porcupine quills. The silence was nearly suffocating, the scene frozen in that awkward position; Dumont staring at Jade, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and she staring back at the young Professor, Snape examining the blood, and the rest of the class watching them with wide eyes.

“You better see the nurse,” Dumont finally muttered with a final glance towards the slit skin. “It looks deep.” With that, she extracted herself from the classroom and disappeared from the dungeons.

## 20. Awakenings

Hermione, Ron, and Harry leaned on one of the nearby beds in the hospital wing while Madam Pomfrey tended to Jade's cut hand. Pomfrey was growing increasingly irritated as Jade continually prodded the open wound amusedly whenever the nurse averted her eyes to load up her swab with more antiseptic.

"Ouch."

"Stop that."

"Ow."

"Stop that."

"Ow."

"Ms. Cordonnier! If you will please cease and desist!" With a stiff smile, Jade's hand dropped away, and she merely stared at the goop-covered cut. Pomfrey turned to them, tray in hand.

"You three keep an eye on her, make sure she doesn't contaminate that antiseptic with her grubby fingers. It's got to be clean if I'm going to heal it." With a final rather exasperated glance at Jade, she bustled towards her office on the opposite end of the ward.

"I can't believe it!" Ron muttered as Pomfrey disappeared behind the half closed door. "Snape letting class out early, Dumont having a mental attack...is everyone going mad?"

"Probably," Jade said touching a bit of congealed blood on her wrist.

"Just Dumont I think," Hermione replied. "The way she grabbed you—don't touch that."

"I'm not," Jade replied defiantly, wincing a bit.

"Hermione, remember the—?" Harry began but was promptly stopped by a warning look from her. He quickly shut his mouth, remembering their agreement to not tell Jade about Dumont and Price's relation.

"What is it?" Jade asked curiously, attention finally drawn away from the cut on her hand. The three looked at each other uneasily. Luckily, they were saved any prolonged awkwardness by the sharp ringing of the bell.

"It looks like she's going to be awhile," Jade said, dropping the subject and staring in the direction of the nurse's office. "You all should go to lunch."

"No, we'll wait," Hermione insisted.

"Don't bother," she replied prodding the flap of webbing between her forefinger and thumb, earning a reprimanding look from Hermione. "You don't want to risk missing lunch." As if seconding that, Ron's stomach rumbled.

"It's settled then."

"Are you sure?" Harry asked her.

"Yeah go," Jade persisted. "Make sure to save me some food."

After a bit more insisting, they obliged and left the hospital wing, ambling slowly towards the Great Hall. The corridors were nearly deserted, and from a distance they could hear sounds of laughter.

"Mental trauma," Harry muttered as they walked, shucking off his robes for the halls were steadily growing warmer. "You don't think—?"

"Yes, I do," Hermione said. "I think Dumont's mental state was why she and her brother left Hogwarts."

"But she's a professor," Ron replied. "Dumbledore hired her! He wouldn't hire a nutter!"

“Are you really sure about that?” Ron stopped and turned to face Hermione, arms crossed over his chest. She blinked at him, awaiting his answer.

“No.”

Harry had faith in Dumbledore, entrusted his life as well as the lives of his godfather and friends to the Headmaster. But Dumbledore did hire Alastor Moody, why wouldn’t he hire a woman who’d gone potty?

“Maybe that’s why she seems to lack a few screws,” Ron contemplated. “There’s no doubt she’s bloody brilliant, but she couldn’t stay on topic to save herself.”

“If you ask me, she’s seems a bit suspicious,” Hermione said quietly. “The way she was sneaking around the school, constantly conversing with Snape about Dumbledore’s proposed plans and such.”

“Snape,” Harry said, suddenly very keen on searching every pocket. “My letter from Snuffles.” He extracted the envelope from his robes, and quickly glanced down either side of the hall to make sure that they were alone. Slipping his finger beneath the flap, he ripped it open, dropping the blank and empty envelope as he unfurled the letter.

“What’s it say?” Ron asked. Harry’s face paled as his eyes scrolled down the rather short length of parchment.

“Harry, what is it?” Hermione asked looking worried. “Is Padfoot all right?”

“They were,” he muttered under his breath. “Oh god, they were.”

“Who were?” Ron said.

“I’ve got to speak to someone who remembers,” Harry said between shallow breaths hastily making his way down the hall. “Dumbledore...he’ll know.”

“Know what?” Hermione asked, her eyes wide with trepidation.

“Come on!”

Harry dashed down the corridor towards the Great Hall, Ron and Hermione right behind him. His heart was pounding as he descended the marble staircase...if it was true, it meant—he had to know if—

“Professor Dumbledore!” Harry said ignoring the curious stares of students who watched as he swept up to the high table. “You’ve got to tell me—”

“What is it Mr. Potter?” the Headmaster asked easily before Professor McGonagall could tell him off for being so rude. Hermione and Ron were right behind him, glancing at the faces that now turned their way.

“Yes Harry?” Dumbledore asked. Harry didn’t know where to start. He tried to wet his palate, and only then did he notice the Great Hall was nearly filled with students watching him with interest.

“I need to speak to you,” he finally managed, lowering his voice. “Please, in private.” McGonagall stared at him with a dangerously arched eyebrow, but Dumbledore didn’t question him. He simply pushed his chair back from the table, motioning for him to follow. Harry sucked in a deep breath and trailed after the tall, wizened form to a side chamber off the Great Hall. Once inside, he recognized it as the very chamber he was asked to enter after his name was extracted from the Goblet of Fire. Without needing him to even make the request, Dumbledore politely asked the subjects of the portraits that decorated the walls to leave. The Headmaster turned towards Harry, as the last painted figure departed, smiling kindly at Hermione and Ron who had followed their friend.

“I think I am safe to assume that what you have to tell me, Harry is of utmost importance,” Dumbledore said, “as Ron has chosen to forgo lunch.”

“My parents were Aurors,” Harry blurted out, not even considering what exactly he wanted to say or know. “Sirius wrote me and told me so.” Dumbledore was silent for a moment as he stood in the afternoon light that streamed from the windows, looking as if he were anticipating Harry’s intentions.

"They were," he finally said. "Two of the best. But Sirius had made it very clear that he wished you not to know." Ron and Hermione swallowed uncomfortably behind Harry, the sound quite loud in the hushed chamber.

"I—I know," Harry started. "But I found out, and I need you to tell me some things."

"I will tell what I can," Dumbledore replied, twinkling eyes blinking wisely.

Harry sucked in a deep breath, struggling for a starting point.

"Were you at a party with my parents?" he managed. "It was spring, and they had just resigned. Sirius was there, and so was Professor Lupin...and the Longbottoms—,"

"The Longbottoms?" Hermione asked quietly.

"What are you saying—," Dumbledore began, with knitted brow.

"You were in a Hawaiian shirt," Harry continued. "It was brilliant orange with pink flowers."

"But how?"

Harry's chest was heaving now.

"Their last mission," he said a bit difficultly. "They were after something, some sort of amulet...in a cave. My dad broke his leg. Professor Dumbledore, you have to tell me...did these things happen?" Dumbledore was staring at him with a mixed expression of surprise and understanding.

"Yes."

It wasn't until air exploded from his lungs did Harry realize he had been holding his breath. The dreams were *real*. They were *his* window into his parent's lives. Suddenly very light headed, his knees gave a little and Ron and Hermione steadied him as he gazed up at the Headmaster.

"How did you know Harry?" the old man asked gently.

"I saw it," he began, promptly stopping to look at his friends who each had a firm grip on one of his arms. "In my dreams...I saw pieces of their lives."

"Harry," Hermione gasped.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Ron asked weakly, shaking his arm a bit.

"I thought the dreams were nothing," Harry protested. "At first, but after *seeing* my parents as Aurors and getting a confirmation that they were...god, the dreams are *real*."

"Harry," Dumbledore said suddenly looking a bit concerned. "Are these dreams at all like the ones you had last year? Did they make your scar burn?" Harry shook his head.

"No, they're...for the most part, pleasant...sometimes they're frightening...but never threatening...not like the dreams about Voldemort." The Headmaster peered into his eyes as if trying to glimpse the images for himself.

"A chance to see your parents' lives, as they should be," he murmured quietly. "It must be a gift."

"But how Professor?" Hermione asked looking anxiously at Harry. "How can we be sure they aren't a warning of danger?"

"I'm not completely certain," Dumbledore replied. "I may be an old codger, but I have yet to understand all the mysteries of the world. I suppose a powerful combination of Harry's own experiences allowed him to access these visions. As for being a sign of danger, as long as he sees them as non-threatening, I believe they're not. I can not even pretend to know why you've been given this chance, Harry, but now that you know these dreams are true and non-threatening, I see no reason for any change in your daily excursions." Still slightly amazed by the conformation, Harry looked up into the smiling, wrinkled face and saw the familiar blue eyes dance with a brilliant spark that seemed absent earlier in the year.

"I think you three should go make something of lunch," the Headmaster said kindly. "Like the Weasley twins, they make something out of lunch all the time...given it's usually something that explodes..." A grin formed on Harry's face and he turned to lead Ron and Hermione out of the chamber, feeling a little more complete.

"Thank you, Professor," he said as he reached for the brass handle of the door.

"Not at all," Dumbledore replied before adding, "keep these dreams as a gift, Harry...but the moment they turn even remotely menacing, tell me right away."

\* \* \*

A few days later, Ron, Hermione, and Harry were sitting alongside Jade, Seamus, and Dean at the Gryffindor table for breakfast. He had just sent a letter the night before to Sirius, aware of his godfather's worry that he would develop a thirst for his parents' cause, and assuring him that would not be the case. Harry was for the fight against Voldemort, there was no doubt about that, but he was not looking to get himself killed. He knew deep down that at a drop of a hat, however, he'd step up for another face-off with the Dark Lord in the name of his parents, and the many others who had died or suffered equally worse fates. But he wasn't a brainless git, and he thought Sirius would feel a bit better if he reminded him of that. It was also quite hard to concentrate on trivial matters such as the Dark Lord with so many things suddenly demanding his attention.

"So there's no way you're going to do the Healing Arts class?" Hermione asked Seamus forking the last chipolata onto her plate.

"Nothing doing," he replied rather glumly. "Sprout says I can't miss a single lesson...me barely making marks and O.W.Ls looming on the horizon." Harry and Ron groaned and glanced at each other. Neither had been studying as hard as they should have been.

"Those little study packets are dead useful," Hermione murmured giving a meaningful glance in their directions. "Work wonders if you actually do them." In retaliation, Ron speared the chipolata off her plate and devoured it. She glared at him, mouth agape, and ready to tell him off before being interrupted by Jade.

"If you're not going, Seamus," she said. "That means there's an opening."

"There are loads of people who wanted to go," Harry added. The sound of splashes and groans drew their attention further down the table. Neville had somehow managed to drop his books in a large tureen, showering Ginny and her fourth year friend with porridge. Hermione stood up and turned to help them as McGonagall hustled forward, a cleaning charm on hand. Neville smiled apologetically, his entire being revealing his anxiety. For the past month or so, he could be seen shuffling nervously about the castle with his nose glued to every sort of O.W.L study materials imaginable.

"I think Neville should go," Dean said wincing as the round-faced boy rested his elbow in a plate of kippers. "Man, he looks like a holiday would do him right." Harry didn't say anything, knowing very well that Neville's parents were in St. Mungo's and a holiday there most certainly wouldn't do him well.

Hermione sat down with them again and they quietly agreed to not announce the soon-to-be opening in the Magical Medicine class just yet, as a mass flutter of wings announced the arrival of post. Two letters dropped before Harry as Hedwig gracefully landed on his shoulder, careful to not knock him in the head with her wings. Pigwideon's landing was far less graceful: he managed to bean Ron square in the forehead.

"Stupid little git," Ron muttered, fishing out the little twittering owl, which had bounced off his head straight into his cereal bowl. Harry laughed receiving a glare from Ron as he opened his first letter.

*Dear Attending Student,*

*It is so very refreshing to see young people, like yourself showing so much interest in programs such as this informative venture into the Healing Arts. You have successfully signed up for this two session class, which will be held on two consecutive days: one day of preparatory lessons, the other a field trip to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies, Britain's most respected wizarding center of medicine. The lessons will be held on Tuesday and Wednesday of the following week. You will meet in the lecture hall located on the third floor in the east wing. Further information will be given along with your lesson.*

*Sincerely,*

*Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey*

“I’m sorry mate,” Dean said apologetically to Seamus who looked particularly glum.

“So am I,” Seamus muttered, opening his own mail. Harry ripped open his second letter, scanned the contents and looked up to find nearly all students, third year and up, murmuring with excitement.

*Dear Mr. Potter,*

*As promised by the staff of Hogwarts, the respectable tailors of Hogsmeade and Beacon Row will create a formal suit for you and the rest of the young men for the Spring Promenade. Your measurements will be taken according to year and house. Your time is set for: The last Thursday of April, 6 p.m.*

*Sincerely,*

*Hogwart’s Staff*

“We’re going to get gowns made!” Jade said happily. Obviously her fears of attending a dance were ebbed away by Fred and George’s incessant praise of last year’s ball. For Ron and Harry, however, the fear had returned in full measure...well, more for Ron anyway, as Harry knew exactly who was going to be his partner. He’d still have to ask Cho though, which didn’t fail to send his stomach through a twisting flop.

“Come on,” Hermione said. “Honestly, it’s hardly anything to get into a flap about. Look at Dean and Seamus.” Both were grinning broadly talking about whom they were planning on asking.

“Well best you two gripe on the way to Care for Magical Creatures,” Jade added, pushing back from the table and stuffing one last slice of toast whole into her mouth, before adding thickly “Weh-gonna-beh-late.”

“Jade,” Hermione replied annoyed. “Must you talk with food in your—wait, Care of Magical Creatures? What’s today?”

“Friday,” Ron said flatly. “What’s got your knickers in a bunch?”

“Friday,” Hermione breathed.

“Very good,” Harry said. “You’re catching on.”

“No,” she said, fear screaming from her round eyes. “That means we’re testing today—for our...our—”

“Certification of Broomstick Use,” Neville completed as he walked toward them. He was looking considerably pale, standing there attempting to keep a firm hold on all of his books.

“I’ve been studying so hard for O.W.Ls I completely forgot,” Hermione muttered sounding quite pained.

“Will you both relax?” Jade huffed irritably. “You two have been complaining about flying since before the ruddy broomstick. Really, you’ll both do fine.” The ringing of the bell signaled their need to hurry to make it to their next class. They dashed across grounds in the warm, spring weather, Jade considerably light-hearted, Harry and Ron mulling over the fast approaching dance, and Neville and Hermione keen on finding a way out of flying today.

\* \* \*

“Right then, I think its ‘bout time we check how yeh morders are doin’,” Hagrid said with a huge grin beaming from behind his wiry beard. “Being tha’ they’ve been left ter do their spinnin’ fer the past couple o’ weeks, I think they should be ready.” He winked at Harry as he passed. Harry along with Ron, Hermione, Jade, and the rest of the class were standing in front of the wooden shelters they had put together weeks ago for the silk morders.

“I hope that’s been long enough for them to die,” Malfoy muttered when Hagrid was out of earshot.

“Get a finger stuck up your conk,” Harry hissed.

“Lick a boot, Scarhead.”

“Now, I’ve given each one of yeh crowbars,” Hagrid was saying as he passed them again. “Yeh’ve got to gently pry the wood off. Take care you mind the morders, they may be a bit cranky. And don’ tear your silk!”

“Bit cranky?” Ron croaked. He eyed Harry uneasily who could only offer a very weak smile. The class was silent, the students staring anxiously at their wooden structures, each taller than Ron and containing a potentially “cranky” monster. Well, Harry considered, Hagrid was true to his word about the morder’s gentleness before...

“Well, get to it, now,” Hagrid urged. The class didn’t move. Hermione was the first to build up enough courage to plunge her crowbar beneath a plank and pry it off. Seeing that a creature did not leap from the hole to devour one of her limbs, the class followed suit as Hagrid walked back and forth offering his help. Harry laughed as Jade managed to catapult a considerably sized plank straight into her own forehead while Ron danced quickly back each time he broke down more of his structure. Hermione looked quite dangerous hacking away toward her silk morder...most likely pouring all her concentration into that task to escape the anxiety of flying later that day. At last a strange hissing sound emitted from her dismantled shelter and she leapt away, brandishing the crowbar like a sword. The cat-sized silver creature crawled from the structure’s remains and circled lazily in the bright sunlight.

“Oh,” Hermione whispered dropping to her knees before her broken-down shelter. From it she pulled out what looked like a liquid-esq fabric, deep cranberry in color. The light caught the material making it come to life in her hands, emblazing the beautiful tone so that it looked like the setting sun. Parvati, Lavender, and several Slytherin girls, forgetting their own prospective silk, pressed in on her, reaching out to touch the beautiful fabric. Even Malfoy was in awe of its beauty.

“I told yeh the silk was nice, didn’t I?” Hagrid said happily walking over to pick up the sun-basking morder. “Well, go on, yeh each probably have silk too, yeh know. Hermione, it looks like you get high marks!”

Sure enough, each morder produced wonderful silk for their caretakers. Jade’s was dark blue, but reflected emerald green, while Harry’s turned out to be a very pale, creamy gold, and Ron’s a dramatic indigo. At the class’s end, their marks were given on the grade of the silk.

“These will make lovely gowns,” Paravati said sighing. Lavender agreed fingering her (what a coincidence) lavender colored silk. The Slytherins and Gryffindors departed for the castle to safely stow away their treasure, many admiring Hagrid’s skill with the silk morders (except Malfoy, but he was unusually quiet which will be considered a compliment).

After dropping off their silk, the Gryffindors returned to the grounds as Hermione’s good mood, which was the result of the wonderful fabric, took a bad turn.

“Listen Hermione,” Harry said reassuringly. “It’s just another exam.”

“That runs the risk of death!” she exclaimed.

“Oh, only if you fall off your broomstick,” Jade replied. Harry glared at her and she made an expression that clearly asked ‘What’d I say?’

“Come on Neville, why not?” Seamus was asking as he approached. He and Dean were following Neville who was steadily picking up his pace.

“I...I need to study for the O.W.Ls,” Neville replied.

“What’s going on?” Ron asked curiously. Dean sighed and threw up his hands.

“Just trying to get Neville to sign up for the opening in that Healing Arts thing.”

“I’m just not interested,” Neville inserted quietly.

“I thought you said you needed to study for O.W.Ls!” Seamus said exasperatedly.

“I did...I mean, I do. But I’m also not interested.”

“Come on mate, we didn’t tell anyone because we thought you deserved a holiday most.” Harry looked from Dean and Seamus to Neville’s pained face. Nobody else knew about his parents.

“Come off it,” Harry said to them earning him a grateful smile from Neville. “He doesn’t want to go, I’m sure someone else does.”

“But why wouldn’t he?” Dean asked. “It’s practically two days off from school!”

“Dean, please,” Hermione said noticing Neville’s look of discomfort, and stomping on Ron’s foot to prevent him from seconding Dean’s question. They walked in silence towards the pitch where brooms were lined up near one of the barriers and several obstacles of floating rings and beams were already in the air. Cho was speaking to Madam Hooch, and was apparently there to help in the certifying, as she had received her certificate last year. She smiled and waved when she spotted Harry and he grinned back enthusiastically. When the fifth year Ravenclaws and Gryffindors were lined up side by side (Mandy Brocklehurst managing to insert herself between Hermione and Ron), Madam Hooch stepped out before them, pulling on dragon hide gloves.

“Now you all worked hard,” she said. “And from what I’ve seen, you’ll all pass”—at this Hermione whimpered a bit—“Now I’ll call you up one by one, and you will perform the test that I’ve provided.” She pointed towards the floating rings and beams.

“You will be granted points according to how well you do said obstacles. Good luck.” And with that, Cho called out names and one by one they completed their flying test. Harry zoomed through in record time, only fumbling after he finished when Cho let out a little cheer. Ron did nearly as well, and surprisingly so did Neville: he only had two near accidents. Jade preformed well enough, and landed to wish Hermione luck. She shakily got onto her broom, nothing short of a ball of nerves and began. She nearly fell off trying to pass the first ring.

“Come on, Hermione,” Ron muttered. She missed another. He winced, before cupping his hands to his mouth.

“GO HERMIONE!” he began shouting at the top of his lungs. “KICK SOME BLOODY BUM!”

“Mr. Weasley!” Madam Hooch reprimanded. “Quiet please!” Harry grinned at Ron and noticed after that, Hermione was doing much better. She landed with a nervous smile on her face, and soon after, the testing was over.

“Thank you,” Madam Hooch said as Cho scribbled down the name of a Ravenclaw who had just landed. “I am pleased, but not surprised, that you’ve all passed your certification. You can now legally fly in the wizarding public.”

“You hear that?” Hermione practically squealed. “We ALL passed! I passed!”

“I must possess the ‘Inner Eye’,” Jade mused. “I saw this coming ages ago.”

\* \* \*

Later that evening, Harry led his friends out of the Great Hall, everyone appearing in a very good mood.

“Fantastic Knickerbocker Glory,” Jade announced.

“Not as good as Fortescue’s on Diagon Ally,” Harry countered.

“How dare you insult the house elves!” Ron exclaimed earning himself (rather proudly, I might add) a glare from Hermione. As they exited Neville pushed through them, followed by Dean and Seamus who were brandishing a sign-up sheet for the Healing Arts in their hands. They had been at it all dinner, and others began to try to convince Neville to sign up for the St. Mungo’s trip as well. Harry had tried to fend them off, but that only resulted in more people insisting it’d be good for him.

“You could be real good at Magical Medicine,” Dean was saying, excusing himself as he pushed past after him. “Come on, it’ll be fun.”

“You’re our friend Neville,” Seamus added. “Come on, if you don’t take the spot, some Slytherin git will get it. You deserve some time off. If I can’t have a bit of a jolly, at least my friends can.”

“I’m not interested, Seamus,” Neville said with a quaver in his voice. Ron raised an eyebrow at him curiously.

“I don’t think he wants too,” Harry tried for the umpteenth time.

“But who wouldn’t?” Dean and Seamus asked in unison looking at Harry as if he were a bit off. He could see their intentions were good, but they didn’t have an inkling of what must be going on in Neville’s head.

“At least tell us why you don’t want to go—,” Dean began exasperatedly.

“I just *don’t*,” Neville said, his voice clipping dangerously; it was enough to silence everyone within hearing range. Ron looked from Harry to Hermione, mouth agape in surprise.

“And why’s that?” drawled Malfoy who had just joined the small crowd leaving the Great Hall.

“Being around sick people make you squirm?” Crabbe and Goyle pointed at Neville and did a silly dance, which Harry inferred, was suppose to be a mock “squirm”.

“No...no, I just...” Neville stuttered.

“Afraid you can’t handle all the information, a little too much blood for such an ickle, sorry mistake like you?” Malfoy said pressing in, pushing Ron and Harry out of the way as they tried to block him. There was never a boy who looked more nervous. Neville glanced at the growing crowd and began to back away, looking at Malfoy with both fear and disgust.

“Just ignore him,” Hermione said firmly, shooting a heated glare Malfoy’s way. Neville nodded and turned to depart.

“That’s right, run away like usual.” At that his round shoulders squared, and he pulled himself up as tall as he could.

“I have studying to do,” he said forcing his voice not to waver.

“A few hours away from your notes isn’t going to make you fail any worse than you already are,” Malfoy returned as several Slytherins sniggered at the round-faced boy. Malfoy faced the crowd with a smirk that rivaled that of any conqueror.

“Look everyone,” he announced. “Neville Longbottom, prime example of uselessness, practically a squib who couldn’t make muggle aspirin work.”

It happened so fast no one saw it coming. It was as if Malfoy's word was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back, but in this case, the camel was Neville's stress and anger. Quicker than anyone had ever seen him move, Neville grabbed Malfoy's collar, pulling him face to face. His brows were knitted. The round-face darkened and aged, so shocking was the transformation that even Hermione didn't attempt to step forward with her Prefects badge.

"I've seen St. Mungo's more times than I could stand," Neville spat. "And I'll do it again so you'll eat your words." With that he let the startled Malfoy go, quickly signed the sheet in Seamus's hand, and departed. Murmurs rippled through the throng of students as Malfoy nonchalantly straightened his collar and left for the dungeons.

"Come on," Hermione said to Harry, Ron, and Jade whose jaws had hit the ground. They parted the crowd and made for Gryffindor Common room.

"Insula Giliganis," she said upon reaching the portrait hole, ignored the Fat Lady's pleasantries and pushed her way in. It was completely empty save one lone figure with hunched shoulders, facing an empty wall.

"You all right, Neville?" she said softly. She was answered by a quiet sniffle. Harry and Ron looked uncomfortably at each other while Jade scoured the area for tissues.

"I never told anyone," Neville said shakily, wiping his nose with his sleeve, refusing to turn around. "I never told anyone that my parents are in St. Mungo's and that my holidays are spent visiting them with Gran, praying that they'd snap out of it."

"What?" Hermione asked shaking her head and shushing Ron.

"It's okay Neville," Harry said awkwardly. "You don't have to—" Neville turned to reveal his tear-streaked face. Jade quickly handed him a tissue, which he held limply in his hand.

"You-Know-Who did that to them," he said with fear in his voice. "It happened after he lost his power, but his followers tortured my parents, took away their minds...he's coming back and the Ministry won't do anything about it. I never told anyone!" his voice was rising now. "And now I've got to see my parents again. They're vegetables! And all because of You-Know-Who, and Malfoy and Dean, and Seamus, and the Ministry, and that STUPID class!" Thinking quickly, Hermione put her arms around him as he dissolved into tears. Over his shoulder, she had a look of stark confusion over Neville's hysterics. Harry, on the other hand completely understood. Neville managed a very innocent existence, hiding the anger and rage that was bottled beneath his tiny frame and round-face. There was bitterness in his voice too, that hit close to home for the Boy-Who-Lived. But with the bitterness was a sort of bravery. Harry never had more respect for Neville than he did then.

\* \* \*

Images were racing before his eyes. The now familiar scenes of his parent's lives flickered across his mind as he was whipped through a sort of kaleidoscope of events until he landed hard on his feet, facing an ornate, circular chamber devoid of any windows. His mother stood in front of a pedestal, a necklace with a lucid green stone rested against her chest. Her eyes were closed and she slowly eased them open as she expelled a long held breath.

"I did it," she murmured as Harry watched her in awe.

"Christ, LILY!" came a faint but frantic call from James Potter. "LILY COME ON, THEY'RE HERE!" Her head whipped around, and she stared past Harry with fear in her eyes.

"Oh god."

She turned on her heels and raced out of the large chamber, tripping on the golden sword with the jade embedded hilt. She stumbled and pressed on, Harry right behind her, through the hall of eerie portraits, through the cave in which the rock creature was still stumbling about, skidding to a halt before the cave lake. The gondola and it's vile little water demon were no where to be seen.

“Corpus Leviosa,” she said pointing her wand at her own chest, levitating herself across the water. Harry panicked, not wanting to loose sight of his mother, but unsure of how to get across. He shut his eyes, praying that he’d be able to and when he opened them, he was racing after Lily on the other side. They slid out of the slit-like opening of the grotto, and with cat-like moves, Lily descended the rock face into the larger cave cavern below.

“Lily! I saw them!” James hollered, hobbling towards her, panic visible on his face in the half-darkness.

“Who?” Harry asked frustrated. Unsurprisingly they didn’t answer. Just as Lily’s arms wrapped themselves around James’s waist, several cloaked figures appeared at the mouth of the cave, each face covered by a dark mask, wands drawn. Death Eaters.

“NO!” Harry yelled, running forward, succeeding in only tripping himself.

“Apparate, apparate, apparate,” James was chanting staring at their enemies, outnumbered four to one.

“No, you think?!” Lily cried out sarcastically. However, before they could do anything, one masked figure pointing his wand at them.

“Stupify!”

They threw themselves to the ground to avoid the curse, James crying out in pain. Harry watched them helplessly.

“Concentrate,” Lily said to her husband. “We can’t apparate if we don’t—” Another spell sent debris showering over them. Harry watched his mother, one arm tight around his father’s neck, her other slipping from his waist. With trembling hands she reached up and clasped the green pendant that dangled around her neck.

“We’ll be taking that,” snarled a woman’s voice as the eight, cloaked figures approached them. Before anything else could happen, a large flash of gold and green light filled the cavern’s expanses. There were screams and most of the Death Eaters managed to apparate. Harry threw his arms in front of his face and pressed his body against the smooth, stone, wall, as large cracks formed overhead. A crash, as if the sky were falling, echoed in his ears, and when he opened his eyes, he found his mother and father clutching each other, staring at a large pile of rocks and boulders. Barely visible in the settling dust were two very still bodies, cloaked in black, hooded robes.

“Harry!” a voice called from very far away, steadily growing louder.

“No, I want to find out what happened!” he cried out as the image began to fade.

“Harry, wake up!”

“No!”

“Get up!”

SMACK!

“ARGH!” Harry flailed his arms as his mouth was suddenly filled with feathers. Rocketing up from the mattress, his eyes snapped open. Spitting angrily, he turned to face Ron who was standing on one side of his bed, holding a split pillow in one hand as a snow-like drift of feathers descended on him.

“What’d you do that for?” Harry asked wiping feathers out of his mouth.

“Oops,” Ron said sheepishly. “Got a bit overzealous. Well, I had to get you up, or we’d be late to the Magical Medicine lesson.”

“No, I forgot.” He leaped from his bed, grabbing a fresh outfit from his wardrobe.

“Harry,” Ron suddenly said as Harry was buttoning his shirt. “You had another dream...like the ones you told Dumbledore about, didn’t you?” Harry paused then nodded.

“I wish I knew why I have them.”

“They’re not warnings, you think?”

“No,” Harry said. He quickly changed the subject. “Come on, Hermione and Jade must be waiting for us.”

\* \* \*

“So now that you’ve been familiarized with the use of alchemy and transferring of energies in the healing world, as well as common magical maladies, I expect you all to take note of these things on our visit to St. Mungo’s tomorrow.”

It was nearing the end of the daylong lesson, and Harry could barely remember where they were going. The class itself was relatively easy and there were exciting hours, like that spent examining weird magical growths. He’d never forget the picture of the man who was cursed with a rabid bum that swallowed his head. He looked like a donut with legs. It took physicians 10 hours to figure out a counter-curse to get him proper again. The best part of the class of course, was when Cho asked him to be her partner during one of the demonstrations.

Madam Pomfrey walked passed and cleared her throat loudly, making Harry jump. Ron let out a loud snore and Hermione rammed an elbow into his ribs to wake him up. Other parts of the day were dry, stuffed to the bursting point with information. It was better, Harry supposed, than being in double Potions or History of Magic. For two days, he could forget about trivial things like the O.W.L.s.

“That concludes the end of the lesson,” Pomfrey said moving towards the front of the ornate lecture hall. “You are to meet promptly in the Entrance Hall at 9:45 a.m., as the Portkeys”—

“Port key?” Jade asked puzzled.

“Shhhhh!”

“—Provided by the Department of Magical Transportations are scheduled for 10 and 10:10 a.m.”

“Finally!” Ron mouthed to Harry who agreed. Jade and Hermione, however, looked slightly disappointed that the lesson didn’t run longer.

“You are dismissed,” Pomfrey said, before turning towards Neville and adding softly, “Quite quick you are with the alchemy cures. A fine physician you’d make one day.” A brilliant blush appeared on his face and he grinned widely. Malfoy stalked past, his henchmen trailing him, without a word. He had grown curiously less cocky since that evening in the Entrance Hall.

“No homework and a day off tomorrow!” Dean sang after commenting on Neville’s natural prowess for Healing Arts.

“It’s more than that, Dean,” Hermione said. “It’s a learning experience.”

“That’s right, Dean,” Ron added rather sardonically. “What were you *thinking*? ”

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly. There wasn’t any homework meaning Harry wouldn’t have to sacrifice hours of his sleep to some essay or another after evening quidditch practice. He went that evening considerably carefree and light-hearted, despite the somewhat grueling routine Angelina had created which included running. Her reason for the new regimen was the new Hufflepuff captain, McKennett who led her team through three victories thus far.

“We’ve got to train ourselves to have an advantage,” she panted to them.

“What? Does this improve take off?” Fred grumbled as he jogged alongside her.

\* \* \*

The next morning, he and Ron got up early and met Hermione and Jade in the Great Hall.

“I’m so envious,” Ginny whined spreading marmalade on her toast. “You get to get out of school and homework? Really now, you’d think the staff was against spoiling their pupils.”

“But it’s a learning experience,” Ron replied wide-eyed. Harry sniggered as he devoured some fried tomatoes.

“I’m so excited!” Jade squealed. She hadn’t eaten a thing off her plate, which was heaped haphazardly with untouched food. “Maybe they’ll let us see a severed head or something!”

“I highly doubt that,” Hermione stated.

At a quarter to ten, Harry led them into the Entrance hall where most of the students signed up were already waiting along with two men and woman, each with two old tires in front of them.

“Attention please! Attention!” Professor McGonagall’s voice boomed through the hall. The chattering slowly died away.

“Please queue up before each of the Transportation representatives, fourteen deep. Now you will be going seven per portkey at a time, as there are two scheduled departures, ten minutes apart. Queue up now, quickly!”

“Come on,” Harry said joining the line closes to them.

“Right then, need seven here,” said the man who headed their line as Mandy Brocklehurst, Neville, and Dean joined them.

“If I have to go,” Neville said to Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Jade. “I’m sticking with you guys.” The man handed them the old tire.

“Just a hand will do.”

They stood around it, each with one hand supporting the donut of rubber, watching it in anticipation.

“Er...” Jade said raising an eyebrow. “Are we supposed to all fit in it or something?”

“Good one, Jade,” Mandy laughed, “you aren’t being serious!”

“I was, actually.”

Hermione snorted.

“It’s a portkey,” Harry explained. “It’ll take us directly to—” a familiar tug just behind the navel signaled their speedy departure. Elbows tucked in, he whirled alongside six other people. With a thud he hit solid ground, and for a moment, thought that he had managed to land the trip on his feet. His hopes were quickly dashed, however as five people fell on top of him.

“St. Mungo’s,” he groaned from beneath the mound of bodies.

“Thanks, Harry.”

“Anytime.”

“Hello, Madam Pomfrey,” a bald, older man said approaching them.

“Dr. McCourt, I hope we find you well?”

“Excellent, and—,” he stopped noticing Jade, Hermione, Harry, and Ron. “Oh, hello again.” It was the same doctor who had accompanied Price that night the Ministry nearly succeeded in taking Jade.

“I hope things are going well for you,” he said awkwardly, flashing a kind smile.

“Very,” Jade replied attempting a strained smile her self. Any further uncomfortable silence was prevented by the arrival of the rest of the students. The doctor turned back to Pomfrey and together they rounded up everyone and started a quick orientation.

“Small world,” Hermione said as they were escorted on their tour led by Dr. McCourt.

The hospital was surprisingly large, and for the most part pretty, located just south of Hogwarts near Edinburgh, Scotland. They were shown laboratories where transfigured cultures were grown, as well as the Emergency room (the sight for truly gruesome magically caused afflictions).

“And this is the recovery ward,” Dr. McCourt announced as they entered this new corridor. “Most patients who have been treated go here until they are fit to be released, oh hello, Mr. Weasley. Now if you’d look this way...” Ron’s eyeballs nearly fell out of his head at the sight of his brother. Percy looked as if he were putting his best efforts towards a welcoming smile, albeit surprised. McCourt had directed the students’ attention to a glass room further down the hall, which made it easy for Ron, Harry, Hermione, and Jade to slip away.

“What are you doing here?” Ron asked quietly. “Testing syringe thickness?”

“Hi Ron,” Percy said taking off his glasses and wiping them with a corner of his robes. “Hermione, Harry...Jade? I hope you are all doing well.”

“Cut the crap, Dad says he hasn’t seen you in days, moved out have you?” With a look from Hermione, Harry knew he wasn’t the only one surprised.

“Just temporarily,” Percy stuttered. “Listen Ron, I’m just doing the best I can—,”

“I bet.”

“And I’m really sorry about what nearly happened to Jade. Really, I’m so happy it all worked out for you.”

“You haven’t ratted on dad to Price, have you?” Ron hissed. “Maybe that’s why you moved out? So you could tell Price guilt free?”

“I wouldn’t do that!” he returned indignantly.

“What’s going on?” Neville whispered. Keeping to his plan of staying with them, he slipped from the tour to stay behind.

“Then why won’t you believe him?”

“Believe who?” all their heads turned to meet the steely gray eyes of Logan Price.

“Nobody,” Harry said quickly. With Hermione’s help (as Jade seemed set on not speaking to the Minstry Head, and Ron was incapacitated by his anger) Harry explained the field trip and their surprise on seeing Percy there. Price nodded thoughtfully before insisting on exchanging pleasantries, shaking their hands, and after a small hesitation, even Jade’s.

“We’ve got to go if I’m to make that meeting with the governors,” Price said to Percy. “Why don’t you say your goodbyes while I sign us out?”

“Sure thing,” Percy said rather weakly.

“Oh, while you’re here,” Price said pausing and turning solely to Jade. He reached into his pocket and extended his hand. She backed away from it.

“It’s a confirmation of your parents’ visit to Hogwarts,” he explained. “It’s been arranged for May twenty-third. They’ll be taking an *air-plane*, if you know what that is, sort of muggle contraption. Anyway, I was going to mail it, but since you’re here...” he handed it to her, cold gray eyes adverted and started away.

“What’s he doing here?” Ron asked heatedly as soon as Price was out of earshot. “What, are you such great friends you have slumber parties and do each other’s toenails now?” Percy stiffened.

“Mr. Price comes here on his free time to work with the mentally ill,” he said straightening his shoulders. “He’s got a soft spot in his heart for them, ask anyone here.” There was a silent stare-off between the brothers, Neville looking from the Weasleys to Harry and Hermione curiously.

“I’ve got to dash,” Percy said awkwardly, having turned away first. “Tell Ginny and the twins...tell them I miss them, all right?” Without waiting for an answer he departed. At those words, the anger in Ron’s face lessened and he stared after the disappearing form of his brother.

“Come on,” Hermione said touching his shoulder. “We’ve lost our class.” He nodded silently and followed her, and his friends down the corridor their peers were last in.

\* \* \*

"We've asked five people, and we're still lost," Harry said exasperatedly an hour later as they stood at yet another crossroad in the hospital. "Didn't they ever hear of 'maps'?"

"I think we've been here before," Hermione noted looking at the charts on the doors as they passed.

"How could you tell?" Jade asked. "All the halls look exactly the same. For all we know, we never moved."

"Let's go this way," Harry said turning left. A few steps through however, Neville stopped in his tracks, and was nearly flung forward as Ron walked into him.

"No, they won't be there," he said firmly, shaking his head.

"What'd you mean?" Ron asked.

"That's...that's the mental ward...Madam Pomfrey said we weren't going to visit that."

"Well, there's a nurse just there," Jade said pointing down the hall. "We won't go in, we'll just ask if she knows where Dr. McCourt has taken the class." Neville hesitated but finally gave in after some reassuring comments from Hermione. (Very slowly) they made their way down the hall, towards two swinging doors marked "Psychiatric Ward" where a nurse was flipping through several manila folders.

"Excuse us," Harry said as they approached. "But do you happen to know where—?"

"The Psychiatric Ward waiting room is?" the nurse replied in a voice that was unnaturally fast. "Sure thing heading there myself come on." She pushed open the swinging doors, Harry and the rest of them trailing helplessly behind her.

"No, we're—"

"Waiting for someone? Just follow me."

"We actually—"

"Just through that hall, you'll have to sign in with the desk nurse there she'll be able to answer any questions you have by now." The words were barely out of her mouth before she was quickly starting away.

"But—"

"Ah, don't even try, Harry," Ron said shaking his head. "Come on, we'll just go ask that nurse she told us about." They started to press forward, but noticed Neville had suddenly frozen to the spot again. This time, however, he was staring through a glass window into a room. His hands were pressed against the pane, and he breathed so that a cloud appeared across the surface before quickly vanishing.

"Neville?" Hermione said touching his forearm.

"I've never gone to see them without Gran," he murmured. Harry's breath caught in his throat as his eyes traveled from Neville to the two people silhouetted on beds by the mid-day light. Though their skin had turned ash colored, and their features were wild and somewhat unkempt, they were unmistakably the Longbottoms Harry had seen in his dreams. Their eyes stared like useless gobstones from their sockets, reminding him of the eerie look on Hermione's face when she was petrified.

"Let's go Neville," Hermione said gently. He jerked away and reached for the door, pushing it open. Looking uncomfortably at each other, they followed him in.

"This is my mum and dad," he said quietly walking over and kneeling between the beds. The two patients showed no sign of recognizing their son. "Hi, mum you're looking better today. And Dad? I hope you're well. I bet you're both surprised I'm visiting so early, eh?" with that he let out a sort of awkward little chuckle.

"Neville, it's time to go," Hermione said.

"Just a few more minutes," he replied. "See? Just vegetables...but maybe, just maybe they'll wake up today." Ron glanced at Harry worriedly. Jade didn't move or say a thing, just stood back from Neville, watching him and his parents.

"Let's go," Ron said. "You're Gran will take you to visit again soon, Neville." The round-faced boy nodded and slowly got to his feet. He smiled weakly at them and followed Harry, Ron, and Hermione towards the door.

"No, wait!" Jade cried out, blocking the exit. "I saw her eyes move!"

"Jade, don't," Hermione said firmly.

"No, Neville come here." Jade grabbed him and pulled him forcefully back to his original position between the beds, where she shoved his hands into the slack palms of his parents.

"Just watch," she murmured excitedly. Hermione was ready to protest, making it clear to Harry and Ron that Jade's actions were hurting Neville with a single glance. Neville stood there, face slackened, watching his parents. Without warning, his mother's hand wrapped around his, and soon after that, his father's did the same. Hermione and Ron gasped while Harry pressed in on Mr. Longbottom's side of the bed for a better look. Their eyes lit up; the change was dramatic.

"Who..." Mrs. Longbottom croaked so quietly the ears strained to hear it.

"Mum?" Neville whispered. "It's me, Neville, mum." His father's hand was now grasping at him tightly and he turned his head. "Dad! It's me!"

"What's going on here?" a doctor cried out bursting into the room. "What are you kids doing? You're not supposed to—dear god almighty." She took one look at the slowly responsive Longbottoms, before leaning out and shouting for the nurses.

"It's me! It's me Neville!" Neville cried out, tears of release streaming down his face.

"How?" Hermione breathed.

"I told you, I saw their eyes," Jade muttered, one hand still gripping Neville's shoulder, the other clasping her pendant. Harry's mouth was slack as he watched the Longbottoms gaze directly at their son. A burning anger at what the Death Eaters had done to them filled his mouth, his lungs. Voldemort's reign had taken away more than lives...it took away things that made life worth living. The sounds of nurses and doctors out in the hall seemed very distant.

Suddenly, Mr. Longbottom's head snapped towards Harry, catching him by surprise. The man's hand reached up, grabbing a handful of his robes pulling him close with shocking strength. Harry struggled, until he saw the look of urgency in Mr. Longbottom's face.

"James," he breathed, eyes boring into Harry's. "James listen; they know, You-Know-Who knows. You tell Lily to get rid of it. Dear god, just get rid of it."

## 21. Of Muggle Promenades and Baffling Dreams

The green and gold light encased the cavern, bleeding into the cracks that began to form in the rock ceiling. The cloaked figures screamed and backed away, most disappearing from the scene, but two remained, struggling over the shaky ground towards Lily and James. James had his wand out, pointing it at the Death Eaters who continued to press towards them.

“Stupify!” he cried out, before turning to wrap his arms around Lily. There was a shrill cry as one of them fell, just as the ceiling of rock came crashing down. The Potters clung to each other, Lily clasping the jade pendent between them until the ground at last ceased its turbulence.

Eventually the dust settled to reveal Lily and James miraculously untouched by the rockslide, which now revealed what looked like a dungeon catacomb above. Shakily, Lily helped James to his feet, steadying him to prevent further damage to his already broken leg. In the pile of rock that had fallen, two bodies were visible, cloaked in ceremonial black robes.

“Who are they?” James asked quietly as blood seeped from the folds of the dark fabric.

\* \* \*

Harry awoke with a start, finding that he had fallen asleep again in the common room, his face stuck to a few pages of *The Magic of Magical History: 1500 to 1900*. The St. Mungo’s trip had come and passed, and now a couple of weeks later, Harry was trying to force his concentration on a more melancholy matter: O.W.Ls. Neville’s father’s words had stunned that little hospital room into silence, Hermione, Ron, Jade, and Neville staring at him with his face inches away from Mr. Longbottom’s. The focus was quickly drawn back to the miraculous restoration of the Longbottom’s sanity, as the doctor and a team of nurses poured back into the room, wands and history charts on hand. It was confirmed that they were indeed responsive, and growing more so by the minute, slowly fighting their way out of fog and skewed time. Neville’s grandmother had apparated there as soon as news reached her, and she and Neville stayed by the Longbottom’s bedside, as Harry and the others were ushered away. It wasn’t until their return to Hogwarts later that day (with the exception of Neville who returned the day after), did Harry even remember the words that rung hauntingly from Mr. Longbottom’s mouth.

James listen, they know, You-Know-Who knows. You tell Lily to get rid of it. Dear god, just get rid of it.

It was as if Frank Longbottom saw Harry and couldn’t remember that James and Lily were already dead. Those words coupled with the new episode in his dreams had made something very clear to Harry. His parents went after that pendent, whatever it was, because Voldemort wanted it. At least, that was his suspicion, and even though he was sure Sirius would skirt the subject, Harry had written a letter to him inquiring about it, sending along a clipping of the Longbottom’s recovery, and accounts of what had happened that day.

“Harry? What are you doing up so early?”

It was Neville, looking tousle haired and pale faced, but nevertheless genuinely happy.

“Just thought I’d catch up on studying,” Harry replied indicating the book, and quickly wiping a spot of drool off the pages. “You came in late last night?”

“Yeah, Gran had a dinner planned in celebration of mum and dad’s recovery. They’re getting better every day, you know. They’re starting to remember what happened...what happened to your parents...and they don’t jibber or go into trances any more.” For Neville, studying was temporarily forgotten as he had dedicated most of his free time during the past few weeks to spending evenings accompanying his grandmother to St. Mungo’s. For the first time in his life, Harry realized forcing down the hint of jealousy, Neville had gotten a chance to meet his parents. The change was dramatic in him, as a cheerful smile and squared shoulders became characteristic of his appearance.

After breakfast, Harry and his fellow fifth year Gryffindors suffered through prolonged double-potions with Slytherin. Snape was attempting to bombard them with as much information as was available in his mental arsenal, and even the Slytherins looked with narrowed eyes at their favorite staff member and head of house. It seemed that anyone threatening to not pass the potions O.W.L would be personally insulting Snape—and that simply wouldn't be tolerated. He took points away from Gryffindor because Neville received the highest quiz score behind Hermione, but the injustice didn't stop there. He also took away points from Gryffindor when Jade answered his question without being called on (then took away five more as she began to argue that she wasn't even in Gryffindor), when Ron stomped on her foot to get her to shut up, when Seamus sneezed, and even a point from Slytherin when Malfoy let out a condescending laugh about the Gryffindors ill-fated second place in the House-Cup Championship. He also lowered Harry's marks several percentages because, well frankly...just because.

Harry managed to make it through the last Potions class before O.W.Ls without attacking Snape, and quickly retreated to Defense Against the Dark Arts in bitter resentment. So what if Snape were risking his greasy hair and hooked nose to fight in Dumbledore's clandestine Order? He didn't have to be a complete member of the living dead about everything.

Defense was mostly review, in which the two hours were spent going over nearly every dark creature and dangerous curse they were introduced to since their first year. Dumont wasn't there and Harry found that he was a little relieved by that. He hadn't been able to look at the strange professor straight in the eye since her irrational reaction to Jade's cut. Also, Percy's comment about Price's dedication to the mentally ill further supported the suspicion that Dumont was crazy. Hermione had thought the same thing, and attempted to get records of it while they were still at St. Mungos, but to no avail.

The class ended with a ten-minute (wooden) swordplay session, in which Lupin insisted they take out their anxieties of the O.W.Ls on each other as long as no eyes were poked out.

"I didn't even remember that banshees prefer areas near water," Hermione groaned flipping through her study guide as they exited the classroom.

"Banshees?" Jade asked with a look of fear in her eye. "What are banshees?" it seemed that the book Dumont had given her had done little to ease her anxieties about Defense, which besides Divinations, was giving her the hardest time. Her arms were filled with notes as she struggled to organize them.

"I can't do it, Harry," Ron said stuffing his book into his bag. "O.W.Ls—there's just no way." Before Harry could say anything, Hermione broke in.

"If you just did all the assignments in your study packets, you wouldn't be so worried now, would you?" Harry and Ron were both going to retort when they rounded a corner and ran straight into Professor Dumont, Jade receiving the full blow as she collided with the young woman. Their items were strewn across the floor.

"Clumsy me," Dumont gasped. "I believe I've missed Defense Against the Dark Arts." Jade didn't say a thing as she bent and quickly shoved her notes into her bag.

"Sorry about that," Dumont apologized. She straightened her glasses that had fallen askew, grabbed her books and materials, and hurried off without further exchange.

\* \* \*

"It's nearly six," Neville announced the next evening in the common room. It was the first evening of several that he was not visiting his parents.

"Really?" Harry said bluntly trying desperately to cram as many exotic species of fungi into his brain. He had been whittling away at the pile of study guides for the past few weeks with Ron. Hermione, like always was generous with both her time and help, but there was only so much she could do for either of them short of taking both their exams.

"Bloody hell," Ron groaned. "We're getting measured for ruddy dress robes tonight."

“Suits, actually,” Fred corrected with a grin having stumbled across their conversation. “Really flattering to my figure, they are.”

“Why is it you can be so happy about certain doom?” Ron replied brusquely.

A few minutes later they were walking towards the Entrance Hall with the other fifth year Gryffindor boys.

“I ended up giving that morder’s silk to my mum,” Dean was saying to Seamus. “I mean I wasn’t going to let them make it into a tux for me, it’s pink!”

“What’d you do with your silk?” Harry asked Ron curiously.

“Gave it to Ginny,” he replied. “ ‘spect she’d look nice in a gown made from it...given that its got a high neck and long sleeves and doesn’t reveal any skin.” Harry snorted but quickly shut up when Ron asked him what he had done with his silk.

“I...er...I gave it to Cho,” he said quickly, imagining how pretty the creamy gold would look on her.

“Really? When? I didn’t even notice,” Ron replied, as it seemed they seldom *didn’t* know what the other was up to.

“Actually,” Harry half muttered in a rushed sort of way, “I mailed it to her.”

“Harry,” Ron said raising an eyebrow at him. “She lives in the same castle as you.” Harry gave him a meaningful glare.

“I know...I just—I...I didn’t think giving a girl a pretty colored sheet would be appropriate, but what was I going to do with it?”

“Good job, Harry,” Ron said sniggering. “I reckon you’re asking her to the ball by post too, am I right? Sending her an invitation?”

“You two have partners yet?” Seamus interrupted.

“Not exactly,” Harry said trying to decide what was the latest possible moment he could ask Cho. “You?”

“I was thinking Parvati, she looked smashing last year. Or maybe even her sister. I’m pretty sure she knows who I am. She said ‘hi’ to me once.”

“She called you Albert, Seamus.”

They arrived to find the Entrance hall in a sort of controlled chaos. There were wizards and witches in a frenzy over measuring tape, creating what looked like a sort of gauntlet of fashion in which students lined up to enter. Most appeared excited, and no one looked as apprehensive as Harry felt. Dances, balls, promenades, anything of the like was just asking for trouble.

“Hello,” Hermione said as she passed them on the stairs. Harry noticed dark circles under her eyes, and a slightly more aggressive bushiness to her hair. Jade was just behind her, looking equally awful. There was a tangle so massive and intricate in her hair that it could have easily been mistaken for the wiry brush of Hagrid’s beard.

“How goes it?” Ron asked and after noticing their rather haggard appearances added, “Really, going up a dress size isn’t the end of the world.”

“Oh, real genteel, Ron,” Hermione replied sarcastically.

“You’ve got some gall to lean on her last nerve before a series of exams,” Jade said rather admirably.

“Come on, now, queue yerselves up!” An older witch was hollering, forcing Harry, Ron, and Seamus to move along. They quickly promised to meet up for dinner and pressed forward with the crowd of other fifth year boys, talking with Ernie McMillan and Justin Finch-Fletchy to pass the time.

“Next!”

Harry went to an especially old witch along the row of seamstresses and tailors, who was awaiting a fresh victim. Ron was hurried to an elderly tailor just to the left of him.

“Now what kind of formal wear can we do for you?” she cackled with a surprisingly toothy grin. “I know, how about something very renaissance? You fancy this?” With a flick of her wand an image of Harry floated before his eyes dressed in a silly ruff and leggings.

“NO!” he said quickly, brushing the image away. “Er...how about something more...up to date?” Looking a bit disappointed she grumbled and created another image of Harry in a classic black suit, which Harry thought, could be worse. So the measuring began, he looked over at Ron who was suddenly silent with contemplation.

“Who am I going to ask, Harry?” he said rather weakly. Harry rolled his eyes. Duh.

“What about Hermione?”

“I s’pose a ball wouldn’t be half bad, going with someone you’re bound to have fun with...I mean Fred and Angelina had a blast last Christmas...”

“Hermione’s very witty—” Harry added.

“So who would I actually enjoy going with—”

“She hasn’t gotten a partner yet either.”

“And who am I going to ask?”

“Ron, shut up. Ask Hermione.” Ron glanced over at him and at last, a look of enlightenment dawned on his face.

“You don’t think—I should ask Hermione, do you?”

:::cricket, cricket:::

Harry stared at him in silent disbelief.

“Yeh all done, lad,” his seamstress cackled, laughing hoarsely as she smacked him smartly across the rump. Harry jumped forward with a horrified look on his face, as sniggers went round.

“Next!” the witch cried out. The only other person who looked as horror-struck as him was Justin who happened to be at the front of the queue.

“You think she’d say yes, Harry?” Ron asked after they escaped into the Great Hall. “Hermione, I mean...especially with what happened last year?”

“As long as you don’t give her a reason to say no,” Harry replied with a wry grin.

“Not funny.”

They met up with Jade and Hermione at the Gryffindor table and ate dinner amidst a hubbub of excited conversations about the up-and-coming promenade. Hermione and Jade would hear none of it however, both focusing their attention with deadly accuracy on their studies and not on obtaining partners, which seemed to severely put Ron off. Harry tried to cue Ron on when he thought Hermione’s mood offered a good opportunity, but it seemed Ron couldn’t manage to get a grasp on his verbal skills. After being questioned about their peculiar behavior by Hermione, Harry gave up the cause and spent most of his time gazing towards the Ravenclaw table where Cho sat.

“You haven’t asked her yet, have you?” Hermione said smiling at her friend. “Honestly, she can’t keep turning down prospective dates for you.”

“You haven’t?” Jade exclaimed rather heatedly. “Dear god, Harry, she already said she’ll go! Do you know what I went through to get you to talk to her?”

“I’m going to ask her, I will!” Harry said in defense. “Just...with the O.W.Ls, I’ve kind of put it off.”

“Ask her tomorrow.”

“Next week.”

“Tomorrow.”

“Monday.”

“To-mor-row.”

“Okay!”

Jade settled back into her seat looking slightly less agitated, but watching Harry with a look that read “it’s death by spork (sort of muggle spoon-fork hybrid) if you don’t”.

They had just finished dinner and were making for the exits when Dumont stopped them.

“This is yours I believe,” she said with a small smile handing Jade the battered Defense Against the Dark Arts guide. “I found it among my things the other night...probably been there since we collided.” She let out a little laugh and excused herself.

“Fabulous,” Jade muttered turning a bit green. “More studying.”

“Er...Hermione?” Ron said out of the blue. “I was wondering...I’ve got to ask you something—,”

“What’s with you?” she asked curiously. “Are you up to something?”

“No—”

“Honestly, if this is a ploy to deviate my intentions of studying tonight, it’s not working.”

“No, it’s—,”

“Ron? Would you walk me to my common room?”

Mandy Brocklehurst had just sauntered towards them, hips swinging as she tossed her hair over her shoulder.

“Please?” she added. “I’d like to ask you something.”

“Erm...er, sure,” Ron stuttered, looking torn as Mandy linked arms with him and dragged him away. Harry cursed her impeccable timing, and turned to find Hermione looking after the two with an expression of hurt on her face.

“Hermione,” he said trying to offer some sort of condolence. She looked up at him and forced a smile onto her face.

“What?” she said, adding quickly, “can’t believe she finds interest in him.”

“I don’t think its mutual,” Jade inserted. Before Hermione could reply, Dean tapped her on the shoulder.

“Could I talk to you for a bit?” he asked timidly. Ignoring the attempts by Jade and Harry to get her to decline, Hermione smiled at Dean and allowed him to pull her aside.

“You don’t think he’s asking her to the ball, do you?” Harry mutter worriedly to Jade as they watched the two converse several yards away.

“Great!” they heard Dean exclaimed. “We’ll have a blast at the promenade!”

“Yes, Harry,” Jade replied. “I reckon so.”

\* \* \*

The tension that filled the next few days was so oppressive it threatened to break the backs of all those who faced the ugly standardized exams. Harry was thoroughly grateful that Angelina had postponed practice until after their exams as she and her fellow seventh years were preparing to tackle the N.E.W.Ts. It seemed anyone who wasn't taking them took extra care in avoiding the fifth and seventh years as it seemed they were suddenly prone to death threats and violent behavior. Even the Weasley twins' heads were buried in books, and it seemed the air was unusually clear of dung bombs and Filibuster fireworks. A week before the Promenade, Harry finally asked Cho to the ball (the alternative was a sporking courtesy of Jade). He had pulled her aside after dinner, her friends walking away not giggling as they did last year but whispering words Harry hoped never to hear. He knew they were talking about Cedric. However, feeling as if he couldn't live with himself if he didn't ask her, he sucked in a breath and took one for the team.

"Cho—do you still want to go with me to the promenade?"

"Of course," she replied.

"Oh well, I didn't think so—wait...yes?"

"I thought we planned this ages ago," she said grinning. "By the way, thank you for the silk, it's beautiful."

"Right, yeah, it's a pretty Cho—" horrified, he quickly spat out—"I mean a pretty *gold*, a pretty *gold!*" Harry would have given his kidney to melt right through the floor but to his relief she laughed, blushed furiously, but laughed never the less.

"Okay, well," she stuttered as she started away. "Me got to, I mean I've got to...see you."

With the Promenade only a day away, Harry stiffly got up and turned in the last of his O.W.L exams (Transfiguration) and as soon as he dropped the anti-cheating quill into the growing pile before Professor McGonagall the stress was wiped away. Frankly, he didn't care if he failed to pass all but one (in which case he would celebrate that he even did that well), he was done with one of the most hideous exams in his magical academia, and it would be another year until he had to worry about N.E.W.Ts. But the paramount of the week was yet to come...he was actually going to the Promenade with Cho.

Ron, on the other hand, was looking more nervous in the wake of the dance than he did before his exams. At dinner that night he fidgeted, throwing glances over at Hermione as she discussed the relief she felt when she saw that the charms O.W.L was nothing more than animating inanimate objects.

"Oh, Professor Vector," Hermione suddenly said getting up as she spotted her Arithmancy instructor making his way down from the high table. "I'll be right back, all right? I want to ask if he thought the exam was accurate."

"That's it," Ron exclaimed as she hurried off. "I've got to ask her tonight."

"Ask her what?" Jade said.

"What else? If she'd go to the Promenade with me," he looked at the pained faces of his friends in confusion. "What?"

"We were under the impression that Mandy asked you," Harry replied.

"She did, but I turned her down," Ron explained hastily wiping his mouth as he watched Hermione return. "She's a bit too high maintenance I think, 'spect she'd want me to wear cologne or practice some other act of civility." Harry and Jade cast each other uncomfortable looks.

"Ron, er," Jade stammered. He didn't even give her a chance.

"Hermione, you done?" Ron asked in a rushed sort of way just as she was getting ready to sit back down in her chair. "Could I talk to you...in the Entrance Hall for a bit?"

"I guess," she replied raising an eyebrow curiously. He grinned weakly at Harry and led Hermione out of the Great Hall. Harry could only stare after them in silence.

“Harry?” Jade finally managed.

“Yeah Jade?”

“Hermione’s going with Dean.”

“I know,” he said, getting up and grabbing her arm. “Come on.” They weaved there way out into the hall and approached their two friends just in time to hear Ron say...

“So will you go the Promenade with me?”

Hermione stared at him, looking a bit startled.

“What, Mandy turned you down?” she said a bit tartly as soon as she recovered. “Need me as a back up, is that it?”

“No!” Ron exclaimed looking rather shocked. “Listen, I know I wasn’t real nice to you about this sort of thing last year—,”

“That’s putting it lightly.”

“—but I’d like you to go with me—”

“After you couldn’t get a girl like Mandy, of course.”

“NO!” Ron exclaimed angrily. “I could have gotten Mandy, but I want to go with you!” That shut her up. Hermione stared wide-eyed at him as he began to turn a brilliant magenta.

“So will you go with me or not?” he muttered. She cleared her throat, nervously twisted a bit of hair about her finger.

“I can’t,” she said quickly and began to climb the stairs. “I—I promised I’d go with Dean.”

“What?!” Ron burst out heatedly

“So much for putting it to him gently,” Harry muttered.

\* \* \*

Ron and Hermione avoided exchanging any conversation that night in the common room as they played a round of Exploding Snap. Jade was off talking to Neville about the annual Herbology convention when Fred and George appeared in their circle.

“Bursting with happiness you lot are,” Fred said sarcastically. “Who died?”

“Wish you would,” Ron muttered.

“Come on now, you can’t all be melancholy with the standardized exams done with and the Promenade merely a day away?” George insisted. Hermione half-heartedly tossed a card into the pile. As if answering him, it exploded. The twins exchanged stern glances with each other.

“It’s decided, then,” George announced. “You lot are coming along with us tonight.”

“Coming along for what?” Harry asked curiously.

“Rule breaking, of course,” Fred replied rubbing his hands together mischievously.

“We, my fellow oppressed pupils,” George whispered dramatically, “are going to break into the locker rooms and play a little midnight quidditch. Where’s Jade? She needs to be in on this too.” The three of them stared at the twins. Harry grinned at the prospect of an illegal game, but both Ron and Hermione remained stoic.

“Come on!” Fred groaned. “You’re not going to cheer? Protest? What’s up with you two?” he looked to Harry for an explanation.

“I went out on a limb and got blown off,” Ron explained rather bitterly. “I’m now date-less.”

“Oh honestly,” Hermione huffed, throwing her hand of cards onto the table. The pile exploded as she departed up to the girl’s dormitory.

“What happened?” Fred asked curiously, brushing soot off Ron’s shoulder.

“Never mind,” Harry said deciding it time to change the subject. “You two got dates for tomorrow?”

“I do,” Fred grinned. “Angelina. She says she’s got a dress to die for.”

“I’m working on it,” George said suddenly examining every female in the common room.

“You don’t have a date either?” Ron said perking up a bit.

“Now I didn’t say that,” he insisted. “Right then, I don’t recall Jade being taken...”

“Jade!” Ron said standing up. “I could ask her, she’ll be cool at a dance.”

“Wrong again, little git,” George said. “I’m asking her.”

“Not if I get there first.” Without warning Ron shot off, catapulting over chairs, sofas, and first years. George was on his heels, quickly catching up. He managed to get to Jade first but before he could utter a word, Ron leaped on top of him, sending them both crashing to the ground before her and Neville.

“Youwannagotothepromenadewime?” Ron gasped looking up at her.

“Er...okay,” Jade said slowly.

“Bloody luck,” George cursed pushing his brother off. “Oh well. Oy, Katie!”

\* \* \*

When the last of the common room dwellers had at last departed after one that evening, Harry went up to retrieve his broom while Fred and George snuck into the girl’s dormitory to drag Hermione out of bed. Surprisingly, she obliged and went along quietly, her prefect’s badge missing from her robes. Harry smiled at her and he saw in the grin she flashed back that she couldn’t wait to tarnish her record just a little. She and Ron still weren’t speaking, and they spent most of the walk to the pitch making Jade relay their messages.

“Can we stop this little game of Telephone?” Harry said in exasperation.

“Tele-what?” Ron asked, looking rather confused.

The twins managed a series of difficult charms to unlock the quidditch supplies and broom shed. As they handed her a broom, Hermione commented on this and George replied, “Mum’s going to drop dead when she’s found out how many N.E.W.Ts we’ve got. Apparently we’re quite brilliant when we apply ourselves.”

It was perhaps one of the funniest games Harry had ever played. Less like Quidditch and more like tag on brooms, they went randomly after the quaffle, chased the snitch in groups, and dived after each other. Even Ron and Hermione loosened up during the game, Hermione suddenly growing more confident in that one illegal evening than she ever was during Flying Lessons.

“Duck!” Jade cried out batting a bludger towards Fred as she flew over Harry’s head.

“It’s mine!” Hermione laughed diving after the snitch as it passed mere inches from Jade’s face.

“I’ll get you back, Jade!” Fred said getting ready for another go at a bludger when Ron flew by and flipped his brother’s robes over his head. Swinging blindly Fred still managed to send a speeding bludger towards his intended target.

“Look out!” Hermione cried out as the bludger collided with Jade. She toppled to the ground as the twins, Harry, Ron, and Hermione raced down towards her.

“Fred, look what you did!” Ron hissed as she let out a groan.

“What I did?” he hissed back. “You flipped my robes over my head!”

“Jade,” Harry said, shaking her shoulder gently. “You okay?”

“I’m okay,” she muttered from the ground.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” George asked brandishing three fingers before her.

"Three, Professor Dumbledore," she slurred.

"Er...not so much."

"We should get her to the hospital wing," Hermione said worriedly.

"Wait..." Harry said suddenly straightening, eyes narrowed. "Did you hear that?" They stood up and strained their ears. Ron was about to say something when Hermione shushed him. It sounded like a flutter of a cloak, several feet above them, barely audible yet growing more noticeable by the minute. Suddenly a dark figure on a broomstick darted over them, the tail end listing rather uncontrollably, it's rider looking as if he could barely hold on. The figure slumped over the broom as he passed the pitch, heading towards the lake, threatening to fall at any moment.

"We've got to do something," Harry insisted urgently, grabbing his broom and pushing off towards the struggling flyer, the twins, Hermione, and Ron on his tail.

"Come on," he urged his Firebolt as he began to gain distance on the stranger. They were over the Lake now. Slowly, as if it were all a movie in slow motion, the slumped figure slid from his broomstick.

"No!" Harry heard Hermione cry out as the body plummeted into the lake below. Heart pounding, he dove into the dark water after the stranger, broomstick and all, forgetting what an inept swimmer he was as he plunged deeper into the lake. He only remembered after he fastened his hand around a fistful of cloak and found himself being dragged down, lungs burning, into the depths. Suddenly arms reached down for him, pulling him and the stranger out of the water. Harry choked as his face broke the surface, clinging to Hermione's broomstick while trying to turn the man over. He succeeded with Fred's help but upon seeing the stranger's face, Harry felt like he was drowning again. It was Sirius.

"Get them out!" a woman who had joined them in the water instructed, and half flying, half swimming they made for the shore.

"What's going on?" Jade called out worriedly having recovered.

"It's Sirius!" George cried out.

"Well, I can see that it's serious, but what's going on?" She joined them in the shallow water to help.  
"Oh. It is Sirius."

"Quick, get the nurse!" the unknown woman said. "And Dumbledore. Oh god, you liar, Black." The twins didn't look back as they dashed towards the castle. Harry didn't even see them go, as he kneeled beside his godfather, a cold shiver running through the both of them.

In what was probably minutes, but felt more like hours, Dumbledore, led by the Weasley twins and followed by McGonagall rushed to their aid. Suspended on a hovering stretcher, Sirius was levitated into the hospital wing with as little noise as possible.

"We discovered they were moving," the unknown woman was saying breathlessly to Dumbledore as Madam Pomfrey swept out to meet them.

"What is going on?" her face turned bone white at the sight of her newest patient. Swallowing with some difficulty, she retrieved her wand and began to examine the moaning form, most likely pretending she had no questions to ask.

"What happened?" McGonagall breathed helping the nurse slip off Sirius's sodden cloak.

"They spotted us trailing them in Poland," the stranger answered. "Black got caught by several curses, but I didn't think they were serious...but then he hadn't been feeling well either. He told me he was fine." She glared hurtfully at Sirius before turning her head away to face Dumbledore, a look of urgency on her face.

"They were content near Bulgaria, had a menagerie of channels for information, supplies, everything. It took something important enough to make them move, and they're heading—"

Dumbledore held up his hands to silence her, motioning towards Harry and the others clustered around Black's bed.

"Voldemort you mean," Harry spoke up from Sirius's side. "That's what you two were doing...not just tracking Death-Eaters, they're too many of them, but Voldemort and his circle." At his side, he felt Ron and Hermione flinch, but he didn't apologize.

"That's not what I said," the woman began.

"But that's what you mean," Harry replied. "You must be Arabella Figg."

"Honored to meet you Harry Potter," she said. "I've heard a lot about you...from Sirius and my grandmother."

"Your grandmother?" Harry asked.

"The cat lady of Privet Drive?" Figg explained. "Nearly skinned your cousin when he ran her over with his motorbike."

"Mrs. Figg?" Harry said disbelievingly. "She's a—?"

"No, she's not a witch, a peach, sure, but not a witch. My grandfather was a wizard...you know my grandmother really fancied you, listening politely to her cat stories and all." Suddenly, the ward door creaked open, sending everyone's head turning. A fat, ginger cat ambled its way in, leaping into Figg's arms.

"Crookshanks!" she cried out giving the cat a hug. "It's been ages, my furry friend. Gran and I have missed you! But I think you're being spoiled enough." With a happy meow, the cat purred in Hermione's direction.

"Bella," Lupin said having just stepped into the ward. "What are you doing here? I got news Sirius—," he paused to indicate the cat when his eyes fell on the shifting form of his friend. "How is he?"

"He's got a fever, seems horribly exhausted," Pomfrey sighed. "But there's no doubt he'll live."

"Perhaps a more detailed discussion in my office, Arabella?" Dumbledore finally said, motioning towards the door. "As for everyone else, I pray it will not be too much to ask that this entire ordeal is kept under wraps. It was a good thing for Mr. Black that you all chose tonight to break the rules. If you would meet me as soon as everything is in order, Minerva." With a small smile, he led Figg out.

"Roaming the grounds at an ungodly hour will be overlooked...this time," she said firmly instating her authority before Dumbledore was out the door. "Perhaps Ms Granger, you can help Ms Cordonnier move her things out of the ward, I'll have Mr. Filch set up a bunk in your dormitory, given that'll it'll be a bit cramped, it'll have to do until...well, until the hospital ward is free of it's guest."

Silence fell around Harry as he sat beside his godfather, Lupin across from him, Pomfrey in her office in search of cold compresses and Ron helping Hermione and Jade. Everything was strangely clockwork, so much so that he didn't even notice when the Weasley twins excused themselves. He stared at Sirius wondering how many times he had nearly lost the only true family he had. That fear was only part of Harry's everyday life.

Sirius's brow was dotted with sweat as he murmured incoherent, garbled words. He was still much too thin, Harry thought wincing inwardly. Jade approached him and silently motioned for the book she had placed on the bedside table on Harry's right. He handed it to her, and she glanced at him worriedly as Sirius let out a groan. Harry stood and Jade placed a hand reassuringly on his shoulder, just as Sirius's eyes snapped open.

"Don't you touch him!" he snarled, an insane glint in his eye as he pushed her away, nearly diving at her as she fell to the ground. Jade gasped in alarm as Lupin threw his arms around Black. He tried to wriggle away, thrashing violently as Harry and Lupin fought to hold him back.

"You get away from him, damnit," Sirius spat, struggling furiously despite his fever.

“No, Sirius!” Harry cried out pulling his godfather’s face towards him. “No, it’s just Jade. Look! I’m fine. Look at me, I’m fine!” The face Harry met as he stared into his godfather’s haunted, dark eyes was frightened, angry, much like the face of one fresh out of Azkaban. The struggle died down, and Sirius allowed Lupin and Harry to lower him back onto the bed, where his eyes rolled into his head and he slumped back into the pillows.

“What’s going on?” Madam Pomfrey demanded racing from her office with cold compresses and washcloths in her hands. Ron and Hermione pulled Jade to her feet and didn’t answer, just stared in shock at Sirius who was now peacefully still.

“It’s nothing,” Lupin said pushing the brown hair from his brow. “Just a fevered dream.”

\* \* \*

Harry ended up kipping in a chair beside his godfather’s bed all night despite Pomfrey’s protest. He dreamed once again of his parent’s adventures, their happy memories after his birth, and was left with the image of the two dead Death Eaters as he awoke the next morning.

Sirius’s fever had broken by dawn, and they spent the day catching up on news: the last quidditch match of the season, Arthur Weasley’s secret campaign within the Ministry, the Promenade, the Longbottoms…Sirius seemed particularly interested in their nearly full recovery. He had said that he only hoped their sanity would keep when it was time they were interviewed about what happened the night they were tortured.

Sirius showed no sign of remembering what he had done the night before, and as this was fine by Harry, Jade was not brought up. Like Lupin had said, it was just a fevered dream.

“Sorry about not answering your last letter,” Sirius said later that evening. “I was a bit preoccupied with trying to not get hexed to death.”

“That’s not funny,” Harry replied. “You would of killed me if I cracked a joke like that.” Sirius grinned at him and Harry laughed. It was nothing humorous really; it was just nice to be talking face to face to family again.

“My parents were after something, Sirius,” Harry finally said regarding the letter he had sent a week before. “Mr. Longbottom knew; he wanted to warn my father about it, I’m sure of it.” Sirius’s grin faded from his face and he turned away from his godson.

“What was it?” Harry repeated.

“The Spirit of Vengeance,” Sirius answered quietly. “The Guardian of Power. Voldemort wanted it, so the Potters were sent out to destroy it.”

“I saw them on that mission,” Harry murmured. “Their memories…”

“I know,” he replied ignoring Harry’s surprised look. “Dumbledore’s told me.”

“I just want to understand those dreams,” Harry said with knitted brow. “Why do I see them?”

“Because something wants you to know.”

Startled by the statement, Harry looked up into Sirius’s eyes. There was something mingled in with that haunted stare…fear?

“What?”

“Nothing,” Sirius said quickly. “I just mean to say that I don’t think those dreams came to you by chance. I just want you to be wary.” Again with the warning of being cautious, Harry thought, a bit annoyed.

“Wait a second,” his godfather said in attempts to change the subject. “Aren’t you s’pose to be getting all sweaty-palmed about some dance or another?”

“The Promenade’s tonight—,”

“And I hear you’ve got quite the date.” At that Harry turned a brilliant scarlet.

“But I was thinking I’d skive off, spend some time with you.”

“No you’re not!” Sirius exclaimed sounding on the verge of outrage. “No godson of mine is going to blow off a girl he fancies on the account of me! What would your father say?”

“Come on, I haven’t seen you in ages. I’ll keep you company.”

“I’m quite capable of being alone, you know. Besides I expect Arabella and Moony will be here in no time to entertain me.” Harry didn’t look very convinced and Sirius reached over to ruffle his hair as he ducked away.

“Go,” Sirius insisted again. “You can visit tomorrow, you know.” Harry’s face fell, realizing Sirius was not going to stay comfortable in the hospital wing, safe behind a charmed curtain for very long. Struggling to not look upset, he forced a grin onto his face.

“You promise?”

“Yes, now don’t make me embarrass you in front of your date by dragging you there myself.” Despite himself Harry’s grin turned genuine.

\* \* \*

“I’m glad Snuffles made you go,” Ron said as they hurried down the spiral stairs to the common room. “I don’t think I could survive another one of these hellish dances on my own.”

“I’m sure Jade’ll be sympathetic,” Harry quipped with a grin, buttoning his black coat over his crisp dress-shirt and vest. The seamstresses and tailors had truly done an admirable job. Ron was thoroughly impressed by his black suit and dress shirt and tie in complementing shades of blue.

They passed Angelina and Fred who were demonstrating some dance move or another, that looked very dangerous, to Alicia and Lee. Spotting Seamus, Dean, and Neville, Harry directed Ron and himself towards them. Ron didn’t seem keen on sitting anywhere near Dean, but he followed Harry anyway.

“You hear who Neville’s date is?” Seamus announced as Harry and Ron sat down. “Susan Bones, that pretty brunette Hufflepuff.” Neville turned beet red as Dean slapped him across the back, wishing him luck for the evening.

“It doesn’t take that long to put on a ruddy dress,” Ron groaned after waiting several minutes for Jade and Hermione.

“How would you know?” Jade asked approaching them from behind. Her hair was pulled back in an elegant knot at the nape of her neck, and the deep blue, empire-waist gown set off the jade piece at her throat.

“Apparently Ron’s an expert in dress wearing,” Hermione added from beside her. In a strapless gown of warm cranberry, she looked prettier than Harry ever gave her credit for. She tilted her head expectantly, her hair twisted back in a swirl of glossy curls.

“Wow,” Harry breathed. “You two look...you two look very nice.” Both girls grinned appreciatively at him.

“Hermione looks a real treat, doesn’t she?” Dean muttered to Ron who was staring at her with mouth agape.

“You dropped your jaw,” Jade said. Ron promptly shut his mouth and made for the portrait hole without a word.

“Is he all right?” Seamus asked Harry.

“Er...yeah,” he replied quickly. “He’s fine, just excited to get to the ball I s’pose.”

“We should all get going,” Hermione broke in clearing her throat. “Ready Dean?” She avoided Harry’s eye as she linked arms with her partner and led the way out of the common room.

"I didn't think Ron would take it that bad," Jade muttered to Harry as they walked. "Maybe I should have listened to Parvati..."

"He'll turn," he said. Hopefully. He didn't want her to have as bad a time as Ron seemed to want to have.

They descended the stairs into the Entrance Hall to find most of the students peering into an empty and rather dim-lit Great Hall.

"Oy, Ron!" Jade called spotting the lanky redhead. "What's going on?" he made his way towards them, pushing past Danny Davies and Mandy Brocklehurst.

"Doesn't look like the Great Hall is decked out for a Promenade," he muttered. "If we're lucky its been cancelled." Suddenly, the massive front doors swung slowly open.

"Ah, just in time," Dumbledore said beaming at his students, dressed in an indigo, plush velvet suit. "All inquires will be answered at the end of the trail of fairy lights." And with that he stepped aside to reveal a path lit by cheery lanterns and twinkling lights.

A murmur of excitement rippled through the crowd as a stream of students, arm in arm began to make their way onto the grounds. Hermione smiled weakly at Harry and Jade and made her way with Dean out through the doors.

"Well, let's go," Ron said flashing a grin, offering his arm to Jade. She took it appreciatively, and Harry was glad that he was going to at least attempt to have a good time.

"We'll have fun," Jade said to him as she led him out. "I've got a supply of Big Bottom Bon Bons in my pocket."

"Hi Harry!"

Harry turned to find Cho waving at him. He nearly passed out. Her ebony hair was twisted into a series of silky knots, and the creamy gold of her dress set off her lightly tanned skin. All he could do was goggle at her as she approached. Thank god Sirius made him go.

"You look good," she said brushing a bit of lint from his shoulder.

"You...you..." Harry stuttered. "You look really, really fabulous."

"Thanks," she said blushing furiously. "Er...shall we go?"

Grinning madly, Harry led her out the doors and along the path. At the end of the trail, they found themselves at the lake where a sight as magnificent as the Christmas snow globe awaited them. A large dance floor was laid out before the lake on which a floating platform for the performers was set to entertain them. Tables dotted the lakeside, everything warmly lit by floating lanterns, candles, and torches.

They joined a table already occupied by Hermione, Dean, Ron, and Jade.

"It's all lovely," Hermione sighed, turning to take in the view of the dark lake where the clear sky and quarter moon were mirrored in its surface.

"Welcome to the Spring Promenade," Dumbledore said, his voice ringing through the warm night. "First a feast to celebrate youth, and of course, the end of O.W.Ls and N.E.W.Ts!" McGongall cleared her throat and Dumbledore added quickly, "but let us not forget, of course, our end of term exams." With a beaming smile he took his seat, and dinner began.

Harry and Cho spoke of quidditch and Ron and Hermione manage to act civilly to each other; however, their clipped conversation was anything but warm. Eventually, the food was cleared and a musical troupe made its way onto the floating platform, receiving whispers of excitement from the crowd.

"I can't believe it!"

"It's Black Cauldron!"

“How did Dumbledore do it? I thought they were on tour!”

Harry could have cared less who the musicians were; it was the dancing he was worried about. The lead guitarist greeted everyone and began the set with a slow, mellow rock piece. Dumbledore, looking far too amused, stood and held out a hand to Professor Sprout who nearly fell over at the chance to open a ball.

“Well, Hermione?” Dean said with a grin. “You wanna dance?”

“Sure,” she said and was led off to the dance floor.

“Come on, Jade,” Ron said hastily, pulling Jade to her feet before she could cram another cream puff into her mouth.

“But I—,”

“Come on!”

Harry watched Ron give her one final tug in the direction of the dance floor. He turned to find Cho smiling at her now clean plate.

“Would you—?” he started.

“Love to.”

Nervously, he got up, fumbled to help pull out her chair, and joined the other students on the floor. His heart was pounding, and the blood that was swimming into his head was making him dizzy, but he was there with Cho. Even with the gossip that erupted when word got out he had asked her to the promenade, she had gone with him more than willingly.

“Well,” Cho said before they awkwardly attempted to put their hands where they belonged. It took several tries as neither of them seemed to be natural dancers.

“That’s a silly dance if I ever saw one,” Fred said with a grin as he dipped Angelina between them.

“Hi Harry, Hi Cho,” Angelina laughed as she was swung around and danced in a different direction.

“Could you believe him?” Ron hissed as he suddenly appeared by Harry’s side, jutting a thumb at Hermione and Dean nearby. “With his hand on her hip, and she letting him and all!”

“It’s a slow dance, Ron,” Jade replied evenly. “You better run for it now, Harry, before he gets you involved in a plan to take Dean out.” Ron glared at her, and sighing, Jade took the lead and danced them away.

“Seems a bit bitter, doesn’t he?” Cho said.

“A bit?” Harry returned earning a grin from her. They moved their feet as in time to the music as possible, and with only a bit of concentration, managed to avoid stepping on each other’s feet.

“Can you believe him?” Harry heard Hermione complain to Dean, finding that they were now right next to him and Cho. “Just because I help him with his homework and make sure he doesn’t kill himself in class, I automatically should know he was going to ask me to the Promenade. Honestly, Ron really needs a reality check if he thinks everyone runs on his clock.” Dean nodded with what seemed like as much sympathy as he could muster. Obviously, Hermione had been going off about Ron for some time now.

“Dumbledore has really outdone himself,” Cho said catching his attention. “With the band, and the lanterns...”

“I know,” Harry replied. He wanted to say more, not about the lanterns of course, just more.

“Cho?”

“Yeah?”

“I just...you know? Just wanted to say thanks,” Harry managed. She looked at him sideways.

“For what?”

“For coming with me, I know it couldn’t have been easy—,”

“Ron, what are you doing!” Hermione hissed.

“Budge up, you’re taking up the dance floor,” Ron returned.

“What is your psychosis, Ron?” she snapped angrily. “The dance floor is huge!”

“Oh, so now I’ve got a ‘psychosis’, eh?”

“Ron,” Jade sighed. “She means what’s your problem.”

“I know that!”

“Let’s go this way,” Harry said quickly leading Cho to another corner of the floor. She raised an eyebrow at him curiously, and he shrugged in response. The next song was faster, and cheers went round as George and Katie took center stage in a dance-off with Lee and Alicia. The crowd cheered louder, (with the exception of most of the Slytherins) as Hagrid was pushed out, and nervously began a silly jig. Harry whooped as the friendly giant danced by.

“It was hard,” Cho said over the music. “Coming with you tonight...but I’m really glad I did.” Harry faced her, and grinned enthusiastically. Maybe this Promenade would turn out all right after all...

The bodies began to disperse, and to Harry’s surprise, he was beginning to have fun making up moves to the beat of the music. After a few more dances, he went in search of some drinks for Cho and himself.

“All right there, Harry?” Hagrid said as he approached the refreshments table.

“Couldn’t be better,” Harry replied picking out two chilled butterbeers. “How about yourself?”

“Same here,” Hagrid sighed with a sort of sad smile on his face. “Olympe loves fairy lights.” Harry grinned up at his friend. It seemed the affections of the games keeper for the giantess headmistress of Beauxbatons had failed to wan in their time apart.

“How’s, yeh know,” Hagrid whispered, leaning down to better converse with Harry. “How’s old Padfoot doin’? He feelin’ better today?”

“Loads,” Harry replied as a bit of anxiety crept into his voice at the thought of his godfather. Sirius’s relatively good health meant he was going to spend more time betting it on the roulette table. The toughest part was that Harry understood.

“Look now, here comes yer partner,” Hagrid announced, nudging him a bit with his elbow, nearly knocking him into the punch bowl. Beaming, Hagrid winked and left to ask Professor McGonagall for a dance.

“Thanks,” Cho said as Harry handed her a butterbeer. They moved towards a table under a lantern that looked like a dragonfly to finish their drinks where their conversation on Victor Krum’s lightning-quick maneuvers was interrupted by Ron and Jade.

“The nerve of her, really,” he muttered taking a seat beside them. “Acting as if she and Dean owned the place...I can’t believe she wanted to go with that git.”

“Dean’s really nice,” Jade said firmly, looking apologetically at Cho and Harry. “Let’s go get drinks, Ron. I think they’d like to be alone.”

“Gibberish,” he replied looking off in Hermione and Dean’s direction. “You don’t mind, right Harry?”

“Actually—”

“See?”

Jade slapped her forehead in frustration.

“You like butterbeer, let’s gets some—” she said, giving it one more go.

“Of all the people Hermione could have gone with—”

“It’s not against the rules to cut in, you know,” Harry said bluntly.

“And why would I want to do that?” Ron asked heatedly. Harry rolled his eyes, but when he looked off onto the dance floor, he noticed something. Hermione and Dean looked pretty miserable. Neither one was smiling or looking like they were having a very good time.

“Excuse me for a second, Cho,” Harry said. “You don’t mind loosing your partner, do you Jade?”

“I’ll help loose him,” she replied.

“Let’s go, Ron.”

“What are you doing?”

Protesting, he was dragged by Jade and Harry onto the dance floor towards Dean and Hermione.

“Sorry, Dean, do you think Ron could cut in for a bit?”

“No, he can’t!” Hermione answered sharply.

“Absolutely,” Dean said looking slightly relieved. He smiled warmly at Hermione and added, “Maybe now you’ll have a better time.”

“You’re a real sport, Dean,” Jade said. “Want to dance?” He readily agreed and followed her deeper into the crowd.

“What do you think you’re doing, Harry?” Hermione insisted angrily, staring after Dean and Jade in bewilderment.

“I’m not dancing with her,” Ron said flatly.

“Dance,” Harry demanded.

“No,” they replied in unison. He crossed his arms looking sternly at them, until crumbling under his stare, they made half-attempts at the sorriest excuse for dancing ever.

“There, you satisfied?” Ron grumbled. The song ended and a slow one began.

“Oh no.”

“Oh yes.” Glaring at Harry, they both obliged, and determined to not let any more of their bodies touch than necessary, kept an awkward distance.

“You trod on my foot!” Hermione snapped at Ron, her attention immediately drawn from Harry.

“What is your problem anyway? You’ve been out to ruin my night since yesterday!”

“Me out to ruin your night?!” Ron returned. “What about the way Dean’s been acting?”

“Like a gentleman, you mean? Are you even making an effort to be logical?!”

People were starting to stare and Harry began to wonder if this was such a good idea after all.

“Why’d you go with him anyway?”

“Because he asked me Ron, and I was his first choice! I’m not going to wait around to be your back up just because you didn’t end up with a partner like Mandy!”

“How could you say that? There was no one else I wanted to go with! You weren’t my first choice: you were my *only* choice! I turned down Mandy because I wanted to ask you, but it took me weeks to work up the nerve, and by that time, a good guy like Dean had already got to you first, satisfied? That’s my problem! I missed out on going with you!”

Hermione was speechless. So was Harry, but that’s not important. They had both stopped dancing, Hermione’s face suddenly turning as deep cranberry as her dress. Ron was the only one who could top her.

“Really?” she said quietly.

"Yeah," Ron squeaked his voice unnaturally high. He cleared his throat and added, "That's pretty much it."

"You're not dancing," Harry noted pointing at their feet. Before they could reply he retreated, feeling smug about his idea. However, he wasn't even off the floor before he distinctly heard Hermione cry out, "OW! Ron, you're treading on my foot again!"

Oh well, Harry thought, baby steps.

He returned to Cho who was smiling. It seemed she had been watching the entire drama from her seat.

"Went well, I think," she said welcoming him back. "How'd Hermione's old partner take it?"

"Really well," Harry replied pointing out Dean and Jade. They watched the couples bemusedly for a bit until Cho spoke up.

"You want to dance?"

"Yeah, okay," Harry replied.

They got up and made for the dance floor passing a table of Hufflepuffs, who stared after them coldly, the sounds of their whispers catching in the light breeze.

"I can't believe he'd be so insensitive as to move in on Cho."

"I told you he wanted Cedric out of the picture."

Harry stopped cold, suddenly feeling an icy grip of guilt rack his lungs.

"Come on, Harry," Cho said looking him directly in the eyes. Without a glance in their direction, she pulled him onto the dance floor.

Harry found that it was suddenly hard to look at her. He could live with the fact that he was the butt of all this gossip, and that many blamed him for Cedric's death. But for the first time, he saw how much Cho must be suffering because he had asked her to the Promenade. He couldn't live with that.

"I'm so sorry," he stuttered in a rush of words. "I really shouldn't have asked you—,"

"No, don't," Cho said firmly. "They don't understand—"

"I shouldn't have asked you to deal with all this—that's really selfish of me. I'm sorry—"

"Harry, don't apologize—"

"I shouldn't do this to you, let's call it a night. I'm really tired any—"

She kissed him.

Needless to say, that shut him up good and quick.

Petrified, Harry stared at her with a sort of shocked expression plastered to his face. There was only one thing running through his mind: *Thank you, thank you, THANK YOU, Sirius!*

"Well," Cho said a brilliant crimson blush appearing on her face. "Er, I've got to go pee...I mean go to the pee, er...toilet. I'll be back in a bit, all right? Yes...I'm—I'll be back."

"Yeah...pee..." Harry replied in a daze.

With an astonished grin, Harry finally managed to amble off of the dance floor. He couldn't believe what happened. Cho kissed him! It took all his will power to refrain from doing some sort of victory dance. Head finally clearing a little, he made his way to the refreshment table where Jade was standing partner-less, tapping a toe in time to the music. Upon spotting her, he remembered what had happened the night she blurted out that he fancied Cho, what she had done for him despite the fact that he had been a git to her because of it. And most of all he thought about the delightfully outcome that it all led up to.

"Jade," he said.

"The Weasley twins ought to have 'caution' tattooed to their foreheads," she said watching them dance exuberantly across the floor. "It's all fun and games until someone loses an eye."

"Thanks," Harry said.

"For the warning?"

"No, thanks for making me ask Cho."

"It went well then?" she asked turning to him excitedly. "I think you owe me a few galleons, Harry."

"How 'bout a dance instead?" he asked.

"Instead of Galleons?" she said in mock shock. Grinning, she allowed him to lead her to the dance floor where he told her every detail leading up to "the kiss".

"So if it wasn't for your big mouth," he said wryly. "It never would have happened."

"I'll take that as a complement," Jade replied. "We'll just say we're even now."

"What'd you mean by that?"

"I never thanked you for being such a good friend," she said. "You, Ron, and Hermione have made this entire...no memory thing, not as bad as it should've been. I still don't remember my past, but when I meet my parents in a few days, I'll have good memories to tell them about Hogwarts."

As they danced, Harry noticed Filch rushing up to Dumbledore in his moldy tailcoat. Whatever he had to say, it seemed particularly important, as the caretaker's face was twisted with anxiety. Dumbledore nodded and turned to follow Filch towards the front gates.

Wonder what Peeves has done, Harry thought. The song ended and Jade and Harry turned to see Cho in the distance, making her way amongst a group of friends back to the lakeside.

"Thanks again, Jade," Harry said. "I promise you a really incredible birthday gift this year."

"I won't hold my breath," she replied. With a grin she squeezed his hand and made to kiss him on the forehead.

It happened so quickly, as if the sky had suddenly exploded. As her lips brushed the tip of his scar a pain so agonizing cracked through his head, seeped down into his body. Harry was sent crashing to his knees, one hand covering his face, the other swinging out in a mad arch to push the source of pain away. His breath was caught in his lungs and the hurt coursed over his nerves. It was more excruciating than anything he had ever felt before. Every cell in his body radiated the white-hot heat; the agony forced his jaw to painfully clench so that he couldn't even scream. If this was living, he wanted to be dead. And in the never-ending ocean of pain that lapped over his head and body, he saw images of his parents rushing towards him; felt the image of the two dead Death Eaters burn into his eyes.

At last, Harry's jaw ripped apart as a scream burst from his lungs, taking with it everything he had and finally he was released into the blissful darkness.

## 22. All Those that are Jaded

The smell of dust and decay drifted from the catacombs above where the cave ceiling had fallen in. With Lily's help, James knelt before the two bodies pinned beneath the rubble, taking care to not disturb the pooling blood. The figures were silent, faces hidden, remains pinned between rock and stone ground. He reached a trembling hand forward, glancing back to find Lily's perplex stare. With a swift movement, James pulled back the hoods.

"Oh god," Lily choked unable to look away. A man and woman stared sightlessly back at her, only a handful of years older than herself and James. Despite the cold look of fear, of being killed by surprise, their faces were pleasant, common, having the familiarity of friendly neighbors.

"I can't believe it," James muttered, falling back into Lily. "No, they can't be..."

"They can't be what?" Harry said angrily. "What is it?"

The Potters didn't move a hair at their future son's voice. Harry pressed in on them, trying in vain to get their attention as the mounting frustration and anger at not understanding threatened to break him. These images had to have a meaning. Life was simply beyond unfair if they didn't. Harry pushed his way between his parents, but they gave him no answers nor showed an inkling of his presence.

"Why? Why am I seeing this? JUST TELL ME!"

\* \* \*

"Harry?" a voice called from somewhere far away, pulling him from the fast-fading images of his parents and the two dead Death Eaters. Just as the last of the dreams drifted away, he became aware of the light that filtered through his eyelids.

"Harry?" Hermione repeated worriedly. With a bit of effort, Harry managed to open his eyes to find she and Ron half-standing over him, looks of anxiousness blanketing their already blurry features.

"What—?" Harry managed to croak. He tried to sit up, but found he only succeeded with Ron's help. After sipping from a goblet Hermione had placed in his hand, he finally felt capable of speaking properly.

"What happened?" he repeated reaching over to retrieve his glasses on the bedside table.

"You don't remember?" Ron asked slowly. "The Promenade?"

"The Promenade," Harry echoed, pausing thoughtfully in attempts to recall the evening. "I went with Cho, and then I was dancing with Jade...and then—where is she anyway?" he looked around aware that she was nowhere to be seen.

"Jade's—," Hermione attempted awkwardly. "Jade's been around..."

"Wait a minute," he asked slowly, his brow knitting. "I didn't—hurt—her, did I?"

"No!" his friends replied quickly, stumbling over each other's explanations as they tried to speak at the same time. Hermione eventually won the verbal battle.

"It's just," she said with difficulty, "Harry—your scar hurt that night...we've never seen you in so much pain." She quickly turned away to hide the tears that were brimming in her eyes.

For Harry, it was slowly starting to fall into place. He had been talking with Jade on the dance floor when she had reached up to kiss him on the forehead. The moment she touched him was when the pain began. He struggled to force away the foreboding wave that began to take over his lungs. Something was amidst, he thought. Jade couldn't have done that to him...there was just no way...was there? Unable to fight the epiphany, he attempted to steer the conversation away from her.

"How long was I out?" he asked bluntly.

"Little over a day," Ron answered uneasily. "Ever since you—on the dance floor. Dumbledore and Price rushed you to the hospital wing—"

"Price?" Harry exclaimed, shooting up from the pillows, regretting it moments later as his head began to throb in protest. "What was he doing here?"

"Bringing Dumbledore news," Ron said. "Fudge has been withholding information...to keep the country from going into mass hysterics—"

"What are you saying?"

"There's evidence that—" Hermione took a quick, shuddering breath "—that Voldemort is back in England..."

"What?" Harry breathed. "Where?" He had a sinking feeling that everything had drastically changed in a matter of a day.

"In Manchester," Ron said unsteadily. "And possibly Sheffield."

"Price came here the other night behind Fudge's back to make sure Dumbledore knew," Hermione added. "The Headmaster's sent everyone and their families letters about the possible threat..."

Harry looked away from his friends, remembering what Arabella Figg had blurted out several nights before...that Voldemort had moved, and he had a reason to. Suddenly, feeling like the bottom of his stomach had dropped away he realized he was the only occupant of a bed in the hospital wing.

"Sirius," he said quickly. "Where is he? He hasn't gone yet, has he? I need to speak to him." Before either Ron or Hermione could reply, the ward door slowly swung open. Arabella Figg entered accompanied by the large figure of a black dog that crept along beside her as if it were her shadow. As soon as the door was closed and charmed to lock, Sirius appeared before them looking both relieved and anxious at the sight of his godson.

"Harry, you're awake," he said sweeping up beside Hermione. "How are you feeling?"

"Obviously better than a day ago," Harry replied smiling with relief that Sirius was still there. For a moment, they all sunk into a silent sort of stupor until Figg cleared her throat.

"Hermione? Ron?" she said gently. "Perhaps you could accompany me to the Headmaster's office...I need to see him before we go."

"You're going?" Harry asked bluntly though it really was no surprise to him.

"Come on, Ron," Hermione insisted firmly, grabbing his hand and pulling him after Figg who nodded them politely out.

"Don't do this," Sirius said sitting wearily in the chair that had, until recently, occupied Hermione.

"You just got here, you've barely rested," Harry insisted trying to keep his heart from lodging in his throat. "Besides, it's not like it's absolutely certain Voldemort's back."

"You're starting to sound like Cornelius Fudge," Sirius said. He averted his eyes, picking up a get-well card aimlessly that Ginny had made for Harry.

"Besides, that's not the point," he continued. "I can't hide here forever, and if there's a chance Voldemort's out there, I've got to be out there too. That's my priority—,"

"Staying alive should be your priority," Harry shot back more heatedly than he meant.

"You don't understand."

It only took one look at him to tell Harry that Sirius knew that wasn't true; if anybody understood him, it was Harry Potter.

"When are you leaving?" he asked feeling jaded by the entire conversation.

"Soon," Sirius replied, finally making eye contact with his godson. "You haven't said if you were okay yet."

"I'm fine," Harry replied without giving it a second thought. Truthfully, he wasn't sure and he sensed Sirius knew it. Luckily, he didn't comment, leaving both of them in the stifling and awkward silence. It was Black who finally spoke.

"I've got to go, Harry," he said. "But I just wanted to tell you something—" he paused looking slightly uncertain. "—Your scar hurting, what happened to you at the ball... I want you to see that as a warning. Just be careful."

"Of what?"

"Of Jade."

"Not this again," Harry said shaking his head angrily. "That's not fair! These half warnings everyone gives me! You can't keep telling me she's mental and she's dangerous and not tell me why!"

"We still don't know why she lost her memory, how she ended up here," Sirius said getting up. "Never mind. Forget I said anything. Arabella and I have to get going."

"You don't *have* to," Harry said stubbornly swinging his legs off the bed. "You *want* to." Sirius attempted to prevent him from getting up by placing a hand on his shoulder.

"That's half true," he admitted thickly. "But you know I couldn't sit back and watch Voldemort do what he did to your parents to other innocent people... what he did to you. Please don't ask me to."

Harry angrily brushed Sirius's hand away. He wasn't being fair to him and he knew it. He was acting childish, and he couldn't even bring himself to look at his godfather's hurt expression. Maybe he was jealous of Sirius, jealous of the fact that it was all right for Sirius to risk his life hunting down the Dark Lord while he could only stay behind. Harry, quite frankly, felt defenseless.

"At least tell me something if you're going to go," he said quietly examining every detail of his pajamas in attempts to hold his temper. "Tell me what happened the night of my parents' last mission."

"I've got to go," Sirius replied hastily as he stood up.

"Two people died that night, didn't they?" Harry pressed.

"They were Death Eaters, Harry."

"But why do I keep seeing them?"

"Another day."

"Then you have an answer."

"I've got to go," Sirius insisted gruffly. He started for the door, but Harry leaped after him, nearly crashing to ground as the blood rushed to his legs.

"What are you doing?" Sirius asked weakly, catching Harry before he could crash-land face first into the floor. The irritation was gone from his voice, and he looked earnestly at his godson.

"There's a reason I'm having these dreams, I know it," Harry insisted, standing straight with Sirius's help. "And I know you can at least fill in the blanks for me."

"No, I can't—"

"Yes you can, the question is why you won't."

"Take care of yourself," Sirius replied quickly releasing his arm.

"I wish you'd do the same," Harry shot back bitterly. Sirius quickly turned away, and Harry watched as his shoulders nearly gave to the impossible weight they must have carried. He had only seen that sort of helplessness in his godfather once before and that was when he was sitting beside him in Dumbledore's office after the third task. Sirius extinguished the moment nearly immediately, but it was enough to leave Harry inches from begging him to stay. He refrained, though the unfairness of it all was suffocating; he couldn't bring himself to torture Sirius that way.

Black opened the door, looking out for any meandering students. As he slipped from the wing, Harry caught his dark eyes as he peered over his shoulder.

“I—I’ll see you soon,” Sirius muttered awkwardly, before melting into the form of a large, black dog, and disappearing from view.

\* \* \*

“Heard you did an awesome dance at the Promenade,” Malfoy smirked the next day as he brushed past Harry, Ron, and Hermione in the halls. “The ‘Girly Faint shuffle’ you called it?” Crabbe and Goyle sniggered as Harry forced himself to stare straight ahead. Malfoy along with a small minority of students set against attending the promenade had been unfortunate enough to miss Harry’s “episode”.

“And why would we reduce ourselves by participating in a *muggle* tradition?” Malfoy had preached around the school in the weeks leading up to the Promenade. He didn’t make it a secret that he would have entertained the idea of making an appearance had he known Harry was going to end up embarrassing himself in the middle of the dance floor.

It had been a day since Madam Pomfrey had at last released Harry from the hospital wing; three since the Promenade, but the events of that night were still very fresh in everyone’s mind.

From farther down the hall, Malfoy sniggered and imitated the “Girly Faint Shuffle” for a knot of his friends who were laughing merrily. Though directed at him, Harry felt slightly relieved to hear the sound of laughter (even if it was mostly from Slytherin), as it seemed there would be very little of it in the days to come.

Him “fainting” offered a comical balance to the very frightening news that had arrived nearly simultaneously with his scar burning. Him “fainting” was something humorous that could be taken from that night, so he gritted his teeth and laughed it off when his peers teased him about it (the exception of course, being any teasing from Malfoy, which is always malicious, and never in good humor). After all, Harry reasoned, they didn’t know what had really happened inside his head; they couldn’t know the true meaning of it all. But they did know about Voldemort.

Apparently Dumbledore received Price’s news whole-heartedly. The ball was swiftly dissembled, the attendees quickly hurried to their common rooms. The next day (in which Harry was still unconscious in the Hospital wing) letters to parents were sent, and the announcement was made to the entire school that there was valid suspicion that Voldemort was back.

“He’s just a—a prick,” Hermione huffed rather scathingly under her breath. It was so unnatural for her to call anyone, even Malfoy names, that Harry couldn’t help but laugh. He smiled appreciatively at her.

“I’d bet my wand Malfoy’s dad has already had You-Know-Who over for tea,” Ron spat crossly.

They entered their Defense classroom and chose seats near a pile of unused cages as the rest of their fellow Gryffindor fifth years flowed in.

Jade was one of the last to arrive. She shuffled in; her shoulders hunched, and immediately chose a seat as far away from Harry, Ron, and Hermione as possible. The rumor was that she had done something to Harry the night of the Promenade. Harry had noticed the way people retreated into conversation behind cupped hands as she passed. Many began to skirt her in the halls and avoided sitting near her in class and at meals. Not that she seemed bothered by it.

Harry hadn’t gotten a chance to speak to her since the dance, as it was only his first day back to class, and she had managed to avoid him at ever opportunity.

According to Hermione, Jade had been growing increasingly introverted since the night of the dance, apt to snapping at the few people who still tried to engage her in conversation.

“She honestly believes she did that to you,” Hermione had said the other night looking worriedly from Harry to Ron. Harry hadn’t answered, just nodded his agreement when Ron insisted that that was ludicrous.

But now, at the sight of Jade, Harry's mind waged a war over whether or not Sirius, Snape, and Dumont may be right about her. He shook his head; it was irrelevant. How could she have a connection to Voldemort? That's who made his scar hurt after all, not people with memory loss. Sirius's paranoia was rubbing off on him, Harry decided.

But she looked so strange, with adverted eyes, hair matted and uncombed...shifty even. He quickly chastised himself for even thinking it: Jade was his friend, and thoughts of suspicion were acts of betrayal against their friendship, which he had once before nearly ended on account of his bad judgment.

Harry was spared any further thought with the entrance of Professor Lupin.

"Good morning," he greeted his class, flashing the briefest of smiles as he flopped his battered briefcase onto his desk. "As Professor Dumont will not be able to join us today, we'll move on from dueling temporarily. Today's lesson will be a furthering of our past lessons on the power of the mind. As you've discovered from what we've covered this year, the discipline of the mind is the source of your most able defense...something you all need to understand considering we may be in the wake of very dark times."

His reaction was minimal to the sudden wave of disquiet that had hit the class. He smiled sympathetically at them and proceeded to write three words on the board:

### *Cognito Ergo Sum*

"Anyone know what this means?" Lupin asked as he turned around. "How about you, Jade?"

"My Latin's a bit rusty," she muttered flatly. A few students turned to look at her curiously. That wasn't true, Harry thought. The few words she actually knew or understood eight months ago *were* Latin. Ron exchanged a raised eyebrow with him as Hermione swallowed and slowly raised her hand.

"'I think, therefore I am,'" she said quietly. "It was the statement developed by Rene Descartes to prove his power of thought was concrete evidence that he existed. He made it in *Meditations on First Philosophy*."

"Excellent, Hermione," Lupin said. "Five points to Gryffindor on account of your thoroughness."

"Rene Descartes," he continued leaning back onto his desk. "Was a scientist, a believer of what was the beginnings of modern philosophy during the European Renaissance—,"

"He wasn't a wizard?" Dean asked puzzled.

"No, Descartes wasn't a wizard," Lupin answered patiently. "However his ideas affected the development of magic just as much as it affected science. You see, prior to the Renaissance, there was a blurred line between science and magic, and often those practicing magic would claim their works to be science, yet they ineptly understood either field. Alchemy was mostly a futile study as sorcery was not yet understood and science could not extract its roots from the common diluted ideas of magic. Only Nicholas Flamel, Hsi Yu Chi, Morgana De Fey, and Merlin proved to be able wizards of that era. They were self-taught, and perhaps possessed a more capable frame of mind to tap into their powers. For most others who had magical capabilities however, there was no understanding as to how magic was supposed to be honed, used, or developed. That's no problem for any witch or wizard today, as we have schools and books to teach magical skills, as well as the aid of wands."

"What does this have to do with Day-cart?" Lavender asked.

"Just getting there," Lupin said. "As I said Descartes was a scientist, but he understood that science would need a new solid foundation, neither based on magic or religion if it is to be furthered. The only way he saw this possible was to strip down all his beliefs, start over theoretically; find truths that cannot be countered, that are absolutely certain."

“After dispelling the world around him, deeming the senses to be deceiving as one can not always accurately sense what is around him, and calling his beliefs and mathematical truths into question because they could’ve been implanted into his mind by a *Deus Deceptor*, or evil creator, he questions his existence.”

“Descartes came to conclude that he *does* exist, because if, in fact this Evil Almighty did exist to deceive him he too must exist to be deceived.”

Harry could hear everyone scribbling frantically away, the only exception being himself and Ron (both were thoroughly lost) and Jade, who was slowly pulling apart one of her quills. If he was lost, he knew she should be, so why wasn’t she bothering to pay attention? Beside him, Ron gulped loudly.

“It’s like saying you couldn’t copy my homework if I never did it,” Hermione whispered to them. “Little chance of that happening—or me letting you copy for that matter, but never mind that. In order for you to copy my work, it’d have to exist. In order to be deceived, you must exist to be deceived.”

“Really cleared that one up,” Harry muttered turning a bit to cast one more curious look at Jade.

“This logical system of elimination,” Lupin was saying underlining the word, *Cognito*, “leads Descartes to the idea of the ‘Thinking substance’. Therefore, his capability of thought, of reason, of making choices proved that he is in fact real. We won’t go further into detail with his meditations, but he also concludes that we are composed of a soul, which is our concrete ‘cognito’ or thinking substance. The soul is the harbor of our emotions. The idea is, a firm foundation of thought is created in this trek to develop a more rational science. This pure thought paves the road to better defense. What makes magic so potent is trust in its existence, trust in your existence, and the understanding that those two truths will make your power possible.”

“Now I know much of that lecture went over your heads, but it is important you understand some things: one, Descartes’ mind experiment is not literal; he is using scientific deduction to prove what we all very well know, developing a basis for how science should be approached. And two, through the power of his mind, his thoughts, though he has never touched a wand, open many doors for the control of magic.” Lupin picked up his wand and commanded a bit of chalk to sweep under the Latin phrase on the board.

“Your homework for tonight is to explain how Descartes’ ideas relate to the development of magic, and how that development is needed for Defense Against the Dark Arts, make sure to think about this as it will be on our exam—,” he was interrupted as Dumont suddenly flew into the room, out of breath, her oblong frames askew.

“Professor...Lupin...” she panted. “Need...help...dungeons. I’ve accidentally liquefied the floor.” Whispers went around the room and some people sniggered into their hands. Harry raised his eyebrows at Ron and Hermione.

“If Dumont’s just been teaching Potions,” Harry said, “that means Snape’s just been called.”

“If the bell rings before I get back,” Lupin said quickly walking towards Dumont, “you all are excused. Pardon me.”

“Cognito Ergo Sum,” Dumont read over Lupin’s shoulder, finally catching her breath.

“Come on,” he urged taking her elbow. For a moment she didn’t move, just stared at the words. Shaking her head, she turned from the blackboard, tore from his gentle grip and led the way out. Lupin didn’t look a bit insulted as he disappeared into the corridor.

“I think I over did the Cobra venom,” they could hear her explain as the two instructors’ footsteps faded away.

\* \* \*

"We'll never get in any decent practicing in before our match against Hufflepuff," Angelina was saying woefully a few evenings later to Fred. They had just finished a rather short practice, as students were no longer allowed to use the quidditch facilities without a staff member present. Despite that, everything else seemed to continue like clockwork. Harry couldn't believe the level of relative norm that was continuing about the castle. Most of the students walked about as if it were any other year free of threat from the Dark Lord. The only evidence of fear was tighter security and rules and the sudden request of some parents for their children to be sent home. In the end, a handful of students had gathered before the front doors awaiting carriages that would take them to Hogsmeade Station and hopefully somewhere safer than Hogwarts. One of them was Cho who seemed infuriated by her parents' request to have her home.

"Hogwarts is the safest place in Britain," she had said heatedly to Harry as he stopped in the Entrance Hall to keep her company as she waited. "It's not fair...all because word got out that You-Know-Who's back in England..." Harry was sorry to see her leave.

Justin Finch-Fletchy had also been among the students leaving. He explained that his parents, upon hearing of the possible danger placed on the magical community, had insisted he come home. He had said they didn't understand the Dark Lord put everyone, magic or muggle in danger.

It got Harry to thinking why Hermione had failed to utter a mention of her parents' reaction to Voldemort's return. It seemed too serious of matter for her not to bring up. Curious, he had asked her as they did their Defense essays in the library the next day. She guiltily looked up from her parchment expertly avoiding both Ron and Harry's curious gazes.

"I intercepted Dumbledore's letter," she said quietly. "Mum and Dad would have insisted I come home...I didn't want them to worry, and I couldn't bear to leave. Not now, not after what I've learned and what's happened." Maybe that was what made her a Gryffindor.

\* \* \*

"Hi there, Harry," Ron said as Harry entered the common room and joined them near an open window. Outside the weather was comfortably hot, like warm cotton on the skin; it was hard to believe anything bad could ever happen; the trail of murders possibly by Death Eaters had stopped months ago.

"Lo," Harry said sitting down. "Tried talking to Jade today?"

"She still avoids everyone," Ron said exasperatedly. "She even told Fred and George to choke on their ton-tongue toffees when they tried joking with her."

"It's like she's pushing everyone away," Hermione said. "And now she's insisting on moving back into the Hospital wing. She won't even let me help her; she's up in our dormitory gathering her things as we speak." Harry shook his head. Any attempts to explain to Jade that she had nothing to do with what had happened to him that night of the Promenade was thwarted by her remarkable ability to disappear. He, Ron, and Hermione had spent the last three days trying to talk to her, but Jade wouldn't hear of it. Running a hand over his face, he leaned forward, noticing a letter sitting on the table beside Ron.

"That for me?"

"Yeah," Ron replied pushing the envelope towards him. He sloppily tore it open.

*Dear Harry,*

*Upon receiving this, I would like for you to report to my office. Not to worry, you are not in trouble. Just say your name upon reaching the gargoyle. It is expecting you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Albus Dumbledore*

“What is it?” Hermione asked.

“Dumbledore,” he answered, stuffing the letter into his jeans. “Asks that I go speak to him.” Waving them a quick goodbye, he made his way back out of the portrait hole towards the Headmaster’s office, wondering if he was about to receive bad news about Sirius, or be told that the Ministry wanted him out of Hogwarts or something equally horrible.

“Harry Potter,” he muttered weakly when he found himself face to face with the now familiar gargoyle that guarded the entrance to Dumbledore’s office. The stone creature leaped aside and Harry was whirled up the dizzying steps. The oak door was open at the top of the stairs and Harry stepped in, finding the Headmaster bent over several stacks of parchment.

“Excuse me, Professor,” Harry said clearing his throat.

“Ah, Harry,” Dumbledore said barely lifting his head. Harry was startled of the weariness in the old man’s voice.

“Come in, have a seat. Don’t mind the mess. Just letters confirming a meeting with the Longbottoms.”

Harry walked in sitting down stiffly in one of the chairs facing the Headmaster’s desk. The familiar whirls and swooshes from the curious contraptions and the occasional rustle of parchment filled his ears.

“Er...Professor?”

“Oh, yes, sorry,” Dumbledore apologized, pushing the letters away from him. He seated himself into his winged armchair gracefully, pulling his spine tall as he placed his hands together, fingertips to fingertips, so that they formed a steeple before him.

“I’ve wanted to talk to you since you woke up a few days ago,” the Headmaster explained. “But alas, it seems some very pending matter arose that refused to be ignored, as I’m sure you understand.”

“What did you want to talk to me about?” Harry asked awkwardly, dying to know.

“I wanted to talk to you about your episode at the dance,” Dumbledore said slowly. “Your scar hurt. I wanted to get your opinion on what you think caused that.”

“Voldemort,” Harry blurted out. “I mean—not there at the moment, just—”

“Danger.”

“Yes.”

They both settled into silence for a while, Dumbledore’s eyes unreadable behind his half-moon spectacles.

“Professor,” Harry finally said, “you told me to let you know if those dreams I’ve been having—about my parents, became threatening.”

“Are you telling me they have?” Dumbledore asked calmly.

“No,” he replied quickly. “Not exactly. But they’re trying to tell me something... I don’t think it’s random, anyway.” As the words left his mouth, Sirius’s voice echoed in the back of his mind: *Because something wants you to know.*

“Do you think those dreams caused your scar to hurt?” Dumbledore asked leaning forward a bit as if intrigued by what Harry had to say.

“I honestly don’t know,” Harry replied. He thought back to that night out by the lake, but all he could recall was Jade’s touch just before the pain began.

“There’s rumors flying around that Jade was the cause of it—”

“Rumors have a way of spreading like wildfire,” Dumbledore supplied. “But they only have substance if those who hear it believe it.”

“Jade seems to,” Harry answered brusquely.

"She hasn't come around, has she?" Dumbledore shook his head and sunk back into his seat. "I've tried explaining what happened at the Promenade to her. For some reason, she has taken what happened to you very much to heart. It was very frightening to see you like that Harry, even I could not surmise the pain you must have been in."

Harry could feel his face reddening. He didn't like to talk about the bad things that had happened to him.

"Is there anything you'd like to ask me?" Dumbledore said. Harry sat up straight, brows knitting as he looked up at the Headmaster. There were too many questions. What were his parents after? What if Sirius was right about Jade? Why was Voldemort suddenly drawn back to England?

"Who died the night of my parents mission?" Harry finally asked quietly.

"Two Death Eaters," Dumbledore said and upon seeing the look on Harry's face, added, "Who had once worked very close with your parents in the fight against Voldemort."

Harry let out a slow breath, sinking back against the chair. His parents were betrayed that night...and it was the miraculous rockslide that saved them. Dumbledore let the answer ferment a bit before clearing his throat.

"I hope that is enough for now," he said smiling warmly at him. Harry nodded and sensed that it was time to leave.

"Thank you, Professor."

"Thank you, Harry."

Harry turned and exited the office feeling more inadequately informed than ever, yet not knowing if any more answers were possible. He made his way through the corridors barely aware of the few people that passed.

"Move, Potter," a voice snarled at him, bringing him back to his senses.

"Professor Snape," Harry said, startled as he caught sight of the Potions master. "I thought you were already—"

"There is such a thing," Snape hissed, "as thinking too much." And without any further exchange, he glided past in a cloud of black cape towards Dumbledore's office.

What was Snape still doing at Hogwarts? Harry thought. Suddenly a thought dawned on him: Snape must be loosing his touch if Price had to inform Dumbledore of Voldemort's arrival in England.

Back in the Gryffindor Common Room Harry joined Ron and Hermione who were practicing charms for the end of year exams.

"You should have mastered the summoning charm last year!"

"I did!"

"Prove it then."

"I can't right now, you're making me nervous!"

"And what if you were in peril and the only that could save you was the *accio* charm?" Hermione returned. "Are you going to explain to St. Peter that you were *nervous*?"

"Fine," Ron exclaimed taking out his wand and pointing it at a book on a table near Harry. "Accio book." Suddenly Harry was tugged forcefully, and found himself speeding towards Ron who's eyes were wide with surprise.

"Oops."

"ARGH!"

BAM! The collision sent both Ron and Harry tumbling over an armchair, as they took down a large desk with them.

"So glad you were able to prove me wrong," Hermione countered sarcastically as she helped Harry to his feet, looking unimpressed at Ron's sprawled form.

"Thanks Ron," Harry muttered dusting himself off. "But really, I could have walked the extra three steps without your help." After Ginny had rushed over to make sure they were all right, and the furniture was righted, Harry told them about Snape.

"You think Voldemort's suspicious of Snape's loyalty?" Hermione asked.

"Don't you think Dumbledore would have gotten news sooner about Voldemort if Snape was really on good terms with Voldemort's inner circle?"

"I reckon he's not going to last very long if this is true," Ron muttered. "I mean—wait a second. Jade's in the common room." Hermione and Harry followed his gaze to a point just to the left of the stairs leading up to the girls' dormitory. Jade was hunched over a book, a box of her articles at her feet.

"Let's go talk to her," Harry insisted getting up. As they approached, they noticed how unkempt she had become. Her robes were hastily put on, revealing a rumpled shirt and unpressed slacks. Her nose was inches from the book in her hands, and her fingers skated across the page she was reading as if they could absorb the words through their tips.

"Jade?" Hermione said. Jade's head snapped up revealing a sort of crazed look in her eye...very much like the look Dumont gave during the sword dueling demonstration during Defense Against the Dark Arts. The book tumbled from her hands, as she snatched up the box at her feet.

"Here, let us help you," Hermione attempted, but she was pushed aside as Jade brushed past.

"Come on, Jade," Ron said. "What's your hurry?"

"I've got to go pack," she mumbled under her breath. "My parents have heard about You-Know-Who. They've requested I come home." Hermione picked up the fallen book and she, Ron, and Harry quickly followed Jade across the room.

"You're leaving? To Bulgaria?" Harry said catching up to her.

"France," she answered without stopping. "I'm meeting them there in two days." She only stopped to kick open the portrait hole.

"Jade," Harry insisted. "We need to talk." She stopped and whirled around.

"We should have never talked," she said before pushing past and rushing down the hall.

"Wait—," Harry reached out, but before he could stop her, he hastily pulled his hand back as if she were fire. As he watched her depart, he found that he was breathing quickly; a small trickle of sweat was running down his brow. Drawing back from the entrance, he realized that he was afraid of Jade.

"Why'd you stop?" Ron demanded watching Jade's form disappear down the hall.

"I—," Harry struggled but was interrupted by Hermione who seemed suddenly as drawn into the book as Jade was.

"This is not a time for studying!" Ron exclaimed.

"No," Hermione said shutting him up. "This is Jade's Defense Against the Dark Arts study book...except ... except the missing chapter...it's not missing anymore."

"What d'you mean?" Ron asked.

Eyes wide, she turned the book around so that they could see. Sure enough, "Chapter 24: Manifested Powers and Dark Existences" stared back at them.

## 23. In the Guise of Innocence

“How in the bloody hell did that get there?” Ron stuttered ogling at the first page of the missing chapter in Hermione’s hands.

“That’s the mystery, isn’t it?” Hermione said quietly, shaking her head as she turned the book around to look at the text. “The pages have been dogged-eared and marked—it looks like Jade was a bit keen about reading it.”

Harry moved behind Hermione to read over her shoulder, swiping a hand quickly over his dampened brow.

“‘Manifested powers’,” Hermione read out loud as Ron stepped beside her as well. “‘objects or ‘existences’ (later discussed below) that are sources of great power. They are created when one invokes his or her magic into a form and binding it to said vessels’—We learned about this in Defense Against the Dark Arts last term—” She looked surprised when she glanced up to find Harry craning his neck in anticipation of the rest of the text. He took the book from her hands, unable to wait and read the rest of the passage.

“The origins of using manifested powers are unknown, but were first documented in Arabic around 200 CE. A simpler form of this power is believed to have been used in religious rites practiced by prehistoric Pagans in Europe, but it later evolves into a way for powerful practice of more traditional magic. One prime example of manifested powers are those of the healing kind marked upon the “Giant’s Stones” of Stonehenge, which were placed there by the great wizard, Merlin—one of Merlin’s greatest powers, healing, is ‘solidified’ in that formation.

“The use of manifested powers was not predominately performed in the Dark Arts until the seventh century. It began to spread in wide practice among Dark Wizards after it was discovered to be the cause of the legendary King Arthur’s death as well as used as a potent catalyst of the Saxon take over in Briton.

“Manifested powers are not innately bad. A form of such magic is evident in the later use of staffs, pendants, and wands.”

“I don’t see how reading this got Jade all hot and bothered,” Ron insisted.

“Shut up, Ron,” Harry said, intently flipping through the pages. “Dark Existences—‘The creation of a power vessel bonded to a certain characteristic. It is used to preserve the power of a wizard, so that his magic may exist after his death. The actual vessel of a Dark Existence does not by philosophical definition exist: though it does take the form of a human or animal, it has neither a soul nor a life cycle—it is created and continues to be and is very difficult to destroy. The Existence is merely a phantom without consciousness and is controlled by either the wizard who created it, or an appointed holder who it is magically bonded too.’

However, non such Forces are believed to be currently in existence today, as it demands a large, powerful surge of hatred and power, as well as the life of the wizard to produce something of that magical magnitude. In any case, the possibility of such a magical vessel and its potential for great destruction should be noted.”

Harry didn’t look up when he finished. He just continued staring at the open book in his hands. The Guardian in his dreams—it was a Dark Existence, an object forged from manifested powers...and his parents went after it to prevent Voldemort getting to it first. But there was something else that suddenly surged into his mind...

That connection he was sure he felt with Jade from the moment he saw her—did that have something to do with what his parents went after that night? It was absurd and it made no logical sense...but yet the pendant that hung from Jade’s neck looked hauntingly like the one his mother had had around hers.

Absent-mindedly, Harry reached up and touched his scar, remembering the agony that had shot through his body as Jade's lips brushed the razor-thin line of marred skin. When Dumbledore had asked him his thoughts about what possibly caused the pain, he had answered instantly, Voldemort. His scar after all, since his first year at Hogwarts, acted as some sort of alarm for a Voldemort attack...it had always hurt before when Voldemort was near or on the verge of something horrible. The pain had nearly crippled Harry when he came face to face with the Dark Lord his first year, and later in his fourth. But yet, in the back of his mind, the memory of what happened the night of the promenade continued to play—his scar had hurt when Jade touched him.

"What do you reckon, Harry?" Hermione asked shaking his arm a bit. Blinking, he looked at her, mildly confused at the concern on her face.

"Why is this chapter back now?" he responded slowly. "Why was it missing in the first place?"

"D'you think that's what Jade was reading just now?" Ron asked. "She seemed even more upset than after the night you—well, you know..."

"It doesn't make any sense though," Hermione insisted. "Why would this bother her?"

"I don't know," Harry half lied. He didn't know what to make of it, but he began to wonder if Sirius's suspicions could be justified. Could Jade be some sort of elaborate trap set up by Voldemort to kill Harry? Dumont and Price seemed to believe something along those lines...and so did Snape. But Jade's parents were found—they were respected researchers, not a trace of bad blood in them.

And she's my friend, Harry reasoned. Not to mention she's only a teenager...would Voldemort have youthful followers? It was then Harry paused and realized he could easily imagine Draco Malfoy, who was their age, as a Death Eater. But what if, what if the jade pendant she wore was actually the manifested power...how could she have gotten a hold of it?

"What's that?"

Ginny was now standing near him pointing at the book, he, Ron, and Hermione were huddled around. Harry instinctively slammed it shut.

"Lesson book," he explained quickly.

"I'm helping Harry with his homework," Ron blurted out.

"That's rich," Ginny snorted before noting the red stain on the book's cover. "Is that blood?"

"No!" all three of them returned loudly. Ginny's eyebrows rose in surprise, but being quick as she was, she got the hint.

"Just wanted to tell you it's your turn to write mum, Ron." She gave a small wave, and a curious look before making her way back to a group of her mates.

"We should go talk to Jade," Hermione finally said. Harry swallowed unable to shake the feeling of unease from his mind no matter how much he wanted to believe in Jade's total innocence.

"Tomorrow."

\* \* \*

After an exhausting Quidditch practice, dinner, and a few futile attempts at studying for end of term exams, Harry dragged himself up to bed. He mulled over his thoughts well into the night, and didn't fall asleep until his dormitory had long filled with the sounds of snoring and sleepy sighs.

"*I can't believe it,*" James muttered, falling back into Lily. "*No, they can't be...*"

Harry was there again, watching as his parents gazed at the two dead Death Eaters, their masks clenched in James Potter's hand. The scene played out as Harry, long used to the repetitive images, observed quietly, refraining from sighing aloud as he watched the familiar events.

The dream looped and he saw his mother questioned by the menacing water demon, battle the rock creature with the curiously accurate sword, and finally taking possession of the Guardian. Harry stepped forward and once again, and for a fleeting moment, he thought his mother had seen him again. The image of the Guardian, her faded gold outlines vanished into Lily as the curious jade pendant rested onto her neck.

*A manifested power*, Harry thought, staring at his mother and the simple necklace. *That would explain everything...even why Hermione couldn't find any books about it.*

A new scene appeared. It had been a long time since Harry had any new dreams to accompany the now very familiar ones.

Lily was sitting with Dumbledore, James just behind her. They appeared to be in the Headmaster's office, Lily's belly swollen with her first and only child.

"We can't just destroy it," she was saying. "We can save her—"

"*It is a product of evil, Lil!*" James insisted heatedly again. "*It's caused death, havoc, destruction—the thing was created to crush everything! Tell her professor, knock some sense into her, please.*"

"You don't understand, James," Lily shot firmly. "Professor...I can *feel* more than just power from it...from *her*."

"Lily," Dumbledore said quietly. "You know I trust your judgment, after all you must know better than anyone. But how? How can what you say be true? And if it is, is there any way to make it impossible for Voldemort to get?"

"Yes," she replied evenly. "Yes, there is a way."

Harry shook his head growing slightly infuriated with the images, wondering how or why he was seeing them. He was grateful to get a chance to see the vibrant lives of his parents as they should be, but every time he saw them, a bit of him ached to reach out and touch them. Harry turned away to find his face pressed against his pillow, vision miraculously clear in the dark room. *Why am I seeing them?*

"Because something wants you to know."

The voice was hollow, familiar, and cut through the hot, night air like lightning. Harry shot up from the bed to find Jade standing near the edge, staring at him.

"ARGH!"

"What is it?" Dean shouted, cursing as he lit his lantern.

Harry's eyes snapped open to find everything blurry without his glasses. Frantically, he scanned the room, emerald irises flashing in the dim light. Jade was nowhere to be seen. It had been a dream.

"Harrywassamatter?" Ron asked shooting up from his covers pale-faced and bleary-eyed.

"No-nothing," Harry replied, and despite the warm night, he shivered. Grinning weakly, he pointed at the foot of his bed.

"Thought I saw a spider."

Seamus groaned, leaned over and blew out Dean's lantern, plunging them back into darkness.

"You sure you killed it, Harry?" Neville's voice called out uncertainly.

"Neville!" Dean and Seamus groaned in unison.

"Sorry."

Harry looked over at Ron who was faintly lit by the quarter moon. Flashing a reassuring smile that he was sure Ron could see, Harry slipped from his bed and made towards the door. He wasn't completely out in the hall before Ron stopped him.

"Was it the dreams?" he asked quietly.

“Yeah.”

They stood there, barefoot and in their pajamas for a while in utter silence.

“I’m just getting some water,” Harry finally said. “Go back to bed, Ron.”

“I’ll come with,” Ron insisted. “Can’t get back to sleep now, anyway.” Despite himself, he yawned. Flashing a sleepy grin, he added, “maybe we can play a game of chess?”

Harry grinned back appreciatively. He had enough of contemplating unexplainable things by himself.

They made their way down the spiral staircase, stretching kinks out of their backs and legs and were surprise to find a dimly lit lantern in a far corner when they reached the common room. Harry led the way towards the sole light source, curious as to who was crouched over the table at such an ungodly hour.

“Hermione!” He said surprised. Before he could help himself, he added, “studying this early? A bit keen, are we?” He was silenced by the torn look on her face.

“What is it?” Ron said uncertainly, pulling up a chair and sitting beside her. She avoided both boys’ eyes and instead gazed at an unfurled letter written on crisp white stationary. It had irises printed in the corners, and beside it was a blank piece of parchment over which her hand was poised, as if preparing to write something.

“Hermione—,”

“I’m real clever, aren’t I?” she said her voice quivering a bit. “Thinking I could actually intercept a letter from Dumbledore—”

“What are you talking about?” Harry asked quietly, brushing a bit of her hair from her averted face.

“This just came,” she said flatly pointing at the artful stationary. “My parents got the notice about You-Know-Who after all”—her nose wrinkled as she attempted to hold back tears—“they want me home by this weekend...they’ve sent a withdraw request to Dumbledore and everything.” Harry’s jaw dropped. First Cho, than Jade, and now Hermione...he couldn’t imagine a school year without her and one glance from Ron told Harry his friend felt the same way.

“It’s not their fault really,” Hermione continued quietly. “They just want me to be safe—but I can’t help being so *angry*. I can’t leave now, what if I can’t come back? What happens then?” Ron looked as if he wanted to say something, but he could only mouth wordlessly like a fish out of water.

“I’ve spent the last hour trying to figure out how to convince Mum and Dad my place is here. If they don’t withdraw their request, I’ll have to go.” She sighed looking horribly pained, but grinned at her best friends just the same.

“What are you two going to do without me?” she asked wryly. Harry could only stare at her in disbelief. Voldemort’s return had resulted in this. Ron swallowed loudly and patted Hermione’s shoulder. Then, surprising all of them, he wrapped his long arms awkwardly around her. At last, the grin faded from her face and she finally cried a little, before quickly pushing away and mopping up her tears looking rather embarrassed.

“But Voldemort is a threat to both the magical and non-magical community,” Harry said still rather shocked. “Maybe you can convince your parents that Hogwarts is the safest place to be—”

“I’ve only got until Sunday,” Hermione explained. “I’m going to try to, but let’s be reasonable—” she and Ron jumped as Harry slammed his hand down onto the table.

“It’s not fair,” he said. He meant everything from his friends’ displacement, to his lack of understanding, and even his parents’ death.

“At least I’ll be able to catch the game Saturday,” Hermione said weakly.

“If only Fudge would do something,” Harry growled. “He’s got so many people that would fight.” Hermione crossed her arms and stood up, knitting her brows.

"Enough," she said. "I've only got three more days here—don't make it a bad time for me." All three were silent for uncountable minutes, the flickering of the candle making their shadows dance.

"I can't believe you have to go," Ron muttered.

"Let's not talk about it for now," Hermione said folding the letter and blank parchment and pocketing them in her dressing gown. "There's no use in moping because of it"—pausing, she eyed them both curiously—"What are you two doing up?"

"I couldn't sleep," Harry said just as Ron blurted out, "he had another dream." Hermione's eye's widened.

"Was it different from before?" she asked. At Harry's silence she added, "go on, help me keep my mind off having to leave."

"Yeah," he admitted. "They were a little different." He shivered as he remembered the strange conversation between his parents and Dumbledore...but mostly when he remembered Jade's face a short distance from his own. He could have sworn she was actually standing beside his bed.

Harry got up and paced near one of the windows that overlooked part of the lake.

"That Guardian my parents were after, whatever it was," he started. "My mum wanted to do something to it...she kept on saying she wanted to 'save her', whatever that means. Whatever the case, Voldemort killed them for it." Ron and Hermione stared at him in disquiet anticipation.

"That chapter in Jade's guide book—it all fits. That pendant was an object of a Dark Existence—I think it had something to do with the death of two Death Eaters the night my parents went after it."

Harry stopped in his tracks and faced the window, examining the stone working around the glass.

"But why would my mum not want to destroy something so dangerous?" Harry asked to no one in particular. "What would want me to know that?" He looked up to find the grounds weakly lit by the quarter moon. He straightened when he noticed the hut in the distance tucked near the forest, its windows brightly aglow.

"Looks like we're not the only ones who can't sleep," Harry murmured. Hermione and Ron got up to have a look out of the window for themselves.

"Harry no," Hermione said instantly catching his drift. "You know we're not allowed on the grounds unattended...and at night? Forget about it, we'll get into loads of trouble."

"I hate to say it," Ron added, "but she's right. Filch has been doing double rounds since Dumbledore's address. Where are you going?" Harry was already half way up the stairs to the boys' dormitory. He needed to get out even if it was for a few minutes and loosing points hardly mattered to him.

"Getting my Invisibility cloak," Harry answered without stopping. "I don't want to get caught. Don't worry, you two won't have to go."

Harry returned minutes later, but before he could place one foot out of the portrait hole, he was pulled roughly back by the collar of his pajamas.

"Didn't you hear Hermione?" Ron demanded. "You can't go onto the grounds unattended."

"Sorry, Harry," Hermione added leading the way out. "But I'm the prefect, so what I say, goes."

After nearly being held up by Peeves and skirting Mrs. Norris twice, Harry, Ron, and Hermione found themselves huddled uncomfortably under the cloak before Hagrid's door.

"Put on weight, Hermione?" Ron grumbled earning a well-deserved elbow to the ribs. Harry warned them to be quiet before knocking on the large door.

"Professor Dumbledore," Hagrid muffled voice called out, within a few seconds he had flung open the door. "Didn't expect to see yeh—hello?"

"It's us, Hagrid," Harry said pushing his way in and pulling the cloak away from his sweaty brow.

“Harry!” Hagrid exclaimed in bewilderment. “Blimey, yeh—yeh know better an’ wondering by yerselves on the grounds—at night and all!” He furrowed his wiry brows, pushing them all inside. “You all know what’s going on and yer still don’t mind the rules!”

“We’re sorry, Hagrid,” Harry said truthfully. “We just—we just came to visit, seeing that your lights were on.”

“There’s no excuse,” the half-giant huffed, though a small smile crept onto his lips at the sight of the three of them. “Breakin’ the rules on account of me, you deserve detentions, the lot of yeh...deserve ter...ter loose hoards o’ points...yeh lot want some tea?” The three of them grinned at each other and obliged.

“Why up so late, Hagrid?” Ron asked pouring milk into his tea. The half-giant plopped down a large pound cake (that was so dense Harry was sure it’d go through the table), noticing as the three curiously glanced at the piles of parchments littered before them.

“Now don’t yeh mind that,” he said firmly, taking off his kitten-print oven mitts, and hastily putting the letters away. “I am lettin’ you kids off for extreme rule breakin’, mind you.”

“Any signs of Voldemort?” Harry asked soaking a bit of pound cake in his tea. Hagrid shivered noticeably, but shook off Harry’s apologies.

“Dumbledore sure thinks so,” Hagrid said slowly. “It’s why you three should be more careful...’specially you, Harry. That Ministry bloke Price says that sorry excuse for a minister knows You-Know—*Voldemort* is back too, but he’s refusing to admit it.”

“So Professor Dumbledore trusts Price?” Ron asked raising his eyebrows.

“And why shouldn’t he?” Hagrid asked offering Hermione a huge slab of the golden cake. “Price may be young and arrogant, but god knows, he’s damn well informed. Used teh go here as well, was a Gryffindor and all.”

“D’you remember when he and his sister left?” Hermione asked. Hagrid choked on a bit of cake.

“How’d you know ‘bout his sister?” he asked.

“Long story,” Hermione explained. “But anyway, we know Professor Dumont’s his sister. Don’t worry, we haven’t told anyone.” Hagrid gave all three of them a pained look that was neither new nor sparsely used when it came to conversations with them.

“They certainly don’t have many get-togethers,” muttered Ron. “Last time they were in the same room, I thought there’d be a lot more blood.”

“I s’pose that happens when yeh grow apart,” Hagrid replied uneasily. “I remember when they left...it was shortly after their parents were killed—never thought I’d see the day students would be leavin’ Hogwarts again...just like when You-Know-Who was in power...” They fell silent once more, Harry barely aware of Fang’s heavy snores from across the room.

“D’you hear Jade’s leaving on Saturday?” Ron said quietly.

“I did,” Hagrid sighed. “She was getting along so well here, and all.” Harry was staring at the scrubbed table.

“She hasn’t been the same since—,” Harry attempted.

“I know,” Hagrid interrupted. “She’s a good soul, yeh three keep at her...even though she’s leaving in a few days.” Harry suddenly realized how short a day or two was. Even with guilty suspicion about Jade’s innocence lurking deep in the pit of his stomach, he wanted desperately to help her before she left for home. She was a good friend, and she deserved at least that. He suddenly looked up, remembering another face he was going to have to say goodbye too. Hermione cleared her throat and sat up straight, a muscle throbbing along the line of her jaw. She looked sadly at Harry and Ron and without warning, a single tear slid down her chin.

“Hermione, what is it?” Hagrid asked slightly bewildered, fishing in his pocket for a handkerchief.

"Jade's not the only one leaving," she said quietly. Hagrid looked up, surprise somehow dulling the twinkle in his beetle-black eyes.

"Voldemort's already displacing everyone," he sighed handing her a handkerchief. "And he hasn't even made an appearance yet."

\* \* \*

After consoling them, Hagrid walked them back up to the castle just as the sky began to grow gray as the tea they had finished off minutes before. When they were safely inside the Entrance Hall, he made them promise to abide by the rules from then on, before wrapping them in a huge bear hug and departing into the twilight. Hermione's spirit was lifted considerably as they had spent the time in Hagrid's hut making suggestions on how she'd convince her parents to let her stay. Hagrid had said he'd be sure Dumbledore wouldn't let Hogwarts' most clever witch go without an argument or two. Her mentality lightened with every step and so did Ron and Harry's.

They were just passing the library when Peeve's shrieking voice cut through the darkened corridor.

"STUDENT OUT OF BED!!!"

"Quick!" Harry hissed throwing the Invisibility Cloak over them just as the bow-tied apparition bolted through the library doors just to their right.

"STUDENT OUT OF BED! BAD, BAD ICKLE STUDENT IN THE RESTRICTED SECTION!!!"

Just then, the library doors were flung open and a dark figure streaked into the hall. Harry and Ron both clapped a hand over Hermione's mouth to prevent her from gasping at the sight of the person who had just appeared. It was Jade.

Wide eyes visible even in the half-darkness, Jade turned and dashed down the corridor right into a second figure Harry couldn't make out. Stumbling backwards, she fled in the opposite direction, the figure making no move to follow her.

"PEEVES! Where are they?" Filch huffed having pushed through a tapestry just as Jade disappeared down the far hallway, his lantern dangling from his gnarled fingers. Harry bit down on his lip as the light from the lantern swung across them in a wide arc and fell upon Dumont.

"Good evening, Professor," the caretaker said approaching the young woman, whose gray eyes flashed in the lantern's glow. "Did you see 'em? The student out of bed, I mean."

"I didn't see anyone," she said simply giving him a politely confused smile. "Was it a student making all that ruckus?" Filch raised his eyebrows at her looking a bit taken aback.

"No, no," he finally said, turning from the professor. "It's that menace, Peeves. Up to his tricks again. Now don't worry, Professor. I'll have him taken care of."

\* \* \*

"Why was Jade in the Restricted Section?" Ron muttered to Harry and Hermione the next morning at the Gryffindor table. Jade had shown up to breakfast late and seated herself as far away as possible from them, amongst some first years who had shifted nervously away from her.

"I don't know," Harry said blinking to clear his eyes as he looked in her direction, "but we're going to find out today."

"She's looking even more distraught than before," Hermione noted worriedly. "What I'd give to know what she was thinking." Harry silently agreed with her, hoping that Sirius's suspicions, his own growing qualms would prove to have no grounding.

The rustling of many feathers through the open windows signaled the arrival of the morning post. From amongst the cloud of brown and tawny, a snow-white bird made its way toward Harry, landing gracefully between him and the pumpkin juice pitcher.

"Hi Hedwig," he greeted her, handing over his serving of bacon. She hooted and nipped his fingers as if apologizing for her lack of letters.

A large gray owl dropped off a few letter for Hermione and her issue of the Daily Prophet, before fluttering off. She sighed heavily as she opened the first one. It was her train ticket home along with a comforting letter from Dumbledore himself explaining that he had already sent letters to her parents in attempts to convince them to let her stay.

“I won’t even be here for exams,” Hermione moaned, violently stuffing the ticket and letters into her rucksack. “It’s not fair—” She cut herself short upon noticing the front page of the wizarding newspaper.

“What is it?” Harry asked as Ron sipped from his goblet and glanced over it. Before Harry could completely register the headline, Ron choked and spat out a mouthful of pumpkin juice all over Neville. Without bothering to apologize, he snatched up the paper to get a better look, his face growing steadily paler.

“Ron,” Harry said just as Ron pushed back from the table and stumbled towards the exit. Hermione and Harry followed after him, ignoring the Slytherins who were gathered around Malfoy.

“I’m guessing, Weasley, the Ministry won’t be getting back their medal,” he hollered in a singsong manner. Your father’s probably hocked it for a decent pair of robes.”

“Shut your cakehole,” Harry spat as he passed, Hermione shooting the laughing group an indignant glare.

“Ron—,” Hermione said stepping up beside him in the Entrance Hall. The lanky redhead was shaking, a mixture of disbelief and anger apparent on his face.

“What is it?” Harry asked. Ron didn’t say anything, just shoved the newspaper under his nose. Harry flipped it open and felt his jaw drop at the sight of the headline.

### **Conspiracy within the Ministry**

*Last December, Arthur Weasley, head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts department was rewarded an Honorary Actions award for his brave and skillful capture of three alleged Death Eaters. His actions seemed to end any further dark wizard activity as from then on, the Death Eater related murders that had began to grow in number shortly after the incident at Hogwarts had stopped. However, in the past few days, rumors have once again been flying high about You-Know-Who’s followers and their return to Britain along with the Dark Lord himself.*

*“It’s absolute rubbish,” says Minister Fudge of the rumors. “It’s unsupported information disguised as a leak from within the Ministry in attempts to undermine our hold over the situation...if there even was one.”*

*Weasley was revealed by anonymous whistle-blowers to be involved in the conspiracy to cause immeasurable chaos within the Ministry and Wizarding community. It seems that one Award for civil service wasn’t enough for the father of eight. He most likely dispelled such fear-inducing and false information in efforts to embark in more opportunities to be the hero. The prestigious medal awarded to the Ministry official has been revoked because of his actions, and he has been given an order of mandatory suspension as he waits to stand trial for conspiracy in the coming weeks.*

“Oh no,” Harry muttered.

“I can’t believe it,” Ron hissed turning from him and Hermione. “I don’t bloody believe it.”

“Don’t worry,” Hermione tried helpfully. “Your dad’ll get out of this mess, I’m sure of it.”

“It must have been Percy,” he continued on, his pale face turning red.

“The Ministry can’t hide Voldemort forever,” Harry inserted.

"They're going to put my dad on trial!" Ron exclaimed as if he hadn't heard him. "He must be humiliated, and all because...because he's trying to do his part in this goddamn fight against Voldemort!"

"The saddest part is that I think Weasley's dad got it right."

They turned to find Malfoy leaning against the doors of the Great Hall, a bemused and malicious smirk clinging to his lips.

"Why don't you sod off?" Harry demanded.

"I'd tell that to Granger there if I cared," he replied. "Just for her safety of course. You-Know-Who's back, and I don't think he'd mind doing yet another mudblood in. Sucks for your dad though, eh Weasley?" Ron growled low in his throat and only failed to pounce because Hermione and Harry each had a firm hold of his robes.

"Your dad's probably having tea with Voldemort right now, Malfoy," Hermione hissed.

"Better the Dark Lord than you, Granger," Malfoy said lazily. "I hope your parents can protect you better than Dumbledore can against You-Know-Who." He made to depart, but paused and turned to add one more thing.

"Maybe my dad's not the only having tea with Voldemort," he said slyly. "Maybe your nutcase of a 'Potter-killer', Jade has invited him for a get-together as well."

\* \* \*

Ron was late to herbology that morning, as he had stayed behind in the Great Hall to share the horrible news with Ginny, and the twins.

"We just go a letter from mum," he said sitting down next to Hermione, pulling on a pair of thick, rubber gloves. "Says she didn't tell us sooner because she was hoping it'd all just go away. In any case, Bill and Charlie are arranging to be home for the trial. The date hasn't even been set. Sorry about spitting pumpkin juice all over you, Neville." Neville shrugged and smiled weakly from his seat across from Ron.

"I didn't like that shirt anyway," he said neatly trimming the atrociously purple leaves of the strange plant they were pruning.

Neville left before the class was let out, as he was going to meet his parents again today. He had mentioned that Dumbledore would be visiting later to speak with them and accompanying him back to Hogwarts.

At last, the bell rung and it was time for the rest of the class to depart. Jade quickly stuffed her things sloppily into her bag before darting through the doors. Harry, Hermione, and Ron pushed their way through the greenhouse doors in attempts to catch her.

"Jade, wait up!" Harry called. She wasn't dangerous; he had to make her understand that...even if he wasn't sure he believed it himself. Malfoy's words had struck a nerve. She only quickened her pace, but in the end, all three of them caught up with her in the castle.

"Come on now!" Ron huffed. Harry sidestepped Jade forcing her to stop.

"Bugger off, Harry," she said sourly.

"Not until you tell us what's wrong."

"Nothing, I've just got loads of packing to do." She brushed past him and he took care to move out of her way.

"Wait a minute, Jade," Hermione said quickly, taking off her pack and extracting Jade's battered Defense Against the Dark Arts guide. "Just thought you'd like this back." Jade turned, the empty and cold look in her eye momentarily melting into panic.

"You didn't read anything in there," Jade said hastily. "Did you?"

“Well yes, but—” Hermione explained.

“No, no, no,” she spat incoherently snatching the book from Hermione’s hand. “No, you can’t know.” She turned away looking a little like the water demon, Gollum from Harry’s dreams. His breath caught in his throat. She had changed so drastically.

In Jade’s haste she walked right into Lupin, but didn’t stop to apologize.

“She’s been a little distracted lately, hasn’t she?” Lupin said quietly, watching her disappear towards the hospital wing.

“We’ve tried everything,” Ron sighed. “She’s just gone and closed herself up.”

“You can only do so much for her,” Lupin said honestly. “In any case, your friendship has helped her more than any of you know. I’m glad to see you three are still going at it.”

“There’s something so completely wrong,” Harry blurted out, pushing his hair from his eyes, feeling frustrated and beset. He was overwhelmed by everything that was happening, all the mixed emotions coursing through him.

“Why would she turn from us like that?” he added.

“Whatever happened during the Promenade,” Lupin said. “It’s traumatized her in maybe the same way that whatever caused her to loose her memory in the first place did. I think she may be remembering her past, and it’s frightening her.”

“But isn’t that good?” Hermione asked. “Isn’t that what we’re shooting for?” Lupin looked at them thoughtfully.

“Sometimes the past can hurt,” he answered.

“Hello, Professor Lupin,” Dumont called out making Harry jump. “You’re late to class. Your fourth years are waiting with bated breath.” Lupin nodded her a greeting and smiled at them.

“Punctuality shall be the death of me,” he said lightly. “I should be off.”

\* \* \*

“If Harry’s scar hurting at the Promenade’s made Jade get her memory back, I don’t see what’s the big deal,” Ron said hurrying after Harry. Care of Magical Creatures, their last class of the day had just let out, and everyone but Ron, Hermione, and Harry were peeling off their robes and heading for the lake. They were much do busy trying to weed out Jade from the crowd.

“Didn’t you hear Lupin?” Hermione said pointedly. “She may be remembering what *caused* her to loose her memory. She could be in denial...I honestly hope she’ll be all right.”

“Me too,” Harry said honestly, feeling worried and nervous about Jade all the same. “There she is.” He pointed to the sole figure going in the direction of the castle. Quickening their pace, they drew level with her.

“D’you want to hang out in the common room with us?” Hermione asked

“Can’t,” Jade replied flatly. “I’m meeting Price and Dumbledore right now.”

“We’ll walk you,” Harry said.

“Perfectly capable of walking myself, thanks.”

“Why is it you keep avoiding us?” Harry shot heatedly. “All we’ve been to you are good friends, we at least deserve an explanation!” He glared at her, wanting her to give him a reason to ignore the suspicion that was lurking in the back of his mind.

She didn’t respond, taking the stairs up to the second corridor two at a time.

“Can’t we at least talk?” Ron demanded, matching her quick steps with his long stride.

“No.”

"We know it was you in the Restricted Section last night," Harry blurted out. "What were you doing there?" Jade stopped in her tracks. A sort of crazed fear danced across her eyes again.

"Studying," she managed slowly before proceeded towards her destination.

"Ice Mice," she said, stepping onto the hidden staircase without so much as a glance back at her friends. Harry's jaw dropped. How could she act as if they weren't there?

"No you don't, Jade," he said jumping onto the moving staircase after her, pulling Hermione and Ron along for the ride. "You don't get to slip away that easily."

"Are you so sure?" she replied, the smugness in her voice making Hermione frown. Harry and Ron looked at her with confusion written on their faces.

"I'm going to a meeting," Jade said, "about me leaving."

With that, she pushed open the heavy oak door. Driven to help Jade, Harry, Ron, and Hermione pressed in right after her.

"Ah, Misters Potter and Weasley, and Ms Granger," Dumbledore welcomed them politely. "So nice of you to escort Ms Cordonnier." Seated in front of his desk was Price, smartly dressed, top hat in toe. He stood to greet them, looking just a bit uncomforted by their company.

"Headmaster," Price said. "This is a personal meeting about Ms Cordonnier's travel arrangements—"

"The meeting hasn't started yet, Logan," Dumbledore replied stepping towards a door to the right of his desk. "Let me just attend to another business of mine ever so quickly. Hermione, Harry, and Ron make for very good conversation." With that, he slipped through the door, shutting it tightly. There was an awkward bit of silence that followed, and soon, Price, unable to take it anymore started up a sort of strained, conversation.

"Do well on your exams, the lot of you?"

"We hope so, sir," Hermione answered for them.

"Summer holiday not to far away."

"Not very."

Price, paced about the room, stopping every few steps to exam the curious contraptions set on display within the circular study. He seemed to be searching for more subjects of small talk when he caught sight of the sword just behind Dumbledore's desk.

"That's beautiful," he said staring at the ruby-encrusted hilt. "What a dream to fight with something like that." He turned and smiled something nostalgic as he came across the Sorting Hat.

"I still remember my first day here," he said quietly. Ron cast Harry and Hermione an uncomfortable look, and Harry knew he was thinking about Dumont and Price's troubled childhood.

"I was a Gryffindor, you know," he added. "My sister and I...what house are you lot in?" He looked up at Harry.

"Gryffindor," Harry replied stiffly.

"And what about you, Ms Cordonnier?"

Jade looked startled at being addressed as she had been quite part of the background since Dumbledore had left.

"I—I don't actually have a house," she answered.

"Pity," Price said. "I wonder why Dumbledore didn't get you sorted?" He reached forward and took the hat gently in his long-fingered hands as if it were a babe.

"Wonder if it still works," and with that, he plopped the beaten leather onto his head. A moment later it yelled out, "Gryffindor!" A sort of quiet smile appeared on his lips.

“You want to try?” he asked brandishing the hat towards Jade. She looked at it wide-eyed, biting her lip.

“Go on, it won’t bite.” With shaky fingers, she reached forward for the tattered brim, taking the hat from the young man. She was just going to place it over her head when Dumbledore re-entered the room.

“Now my head is clear for other things,” he announced, then spotting Jade with the hat inches from her head, added, “is it all right if you give that old thing a go later? I’d like to make sure you get home safely, even if I am sorry your parents have decided to ask you to return this early.”

“We’ll wait outside,” Hermione said pulling Ron and Harry towards the stairs by the back of their robes.

“I kind of feel sorry for Price,” Ron said as the gargoyle stepped back into place. “Parents killed, then having a sister who’s completely off her plot...probably glad Dumont changed her name.”

A quarter of an hour later, Jade appeared. Her face was unreadable, or as Harry thought, blank—devoid of any sort of emotion or thought.

“So,” Ron said. “How’d it go?”

“The Ministry’s set up a Port Key that’ll take me directly to France,” she said. “It’ll be in Hogsmeade. A port key won’t work anywhere in Hogwarts now that Dumbledore’s placed loads of new reinforcements on the grounds. Price will accompany me; he’s got business with the French Ministry’s head of International Magical Cooperations. We’re set to leave tomorrow morning at ten.”

“You’re going to miss the game,” Harry muttered flatly.

They followed her back to the Hospital wing, but this time Jade didn’t argue. She pushed open the door and led the way in, promptly sitting behind a table that had been set up at the foot of the corner bed she occupied. It was littered with fraying spools of gauze and linen bandages. Picking up a pair of scissors, she began to pick up where she had obviously left off, snipping off the unraveled ends of the linen strips.

“I’ve got to earn my keep somehow,” she said dryly. “I don’t s’pose you three will leave, so I won’t bother insisting.” Ron sat uncomfortably down on Jade’s bed, fidgeting with a corner of her gray covers. Hermione chose a sit next to Jade near her packed items looking tired and near tears again.

“Are you excited?” Harry asked Jade leaning on the front of the table. “Seeing your parents again, I mean.”

“More like for the first time,” she replied. “I haven’t got a memory, or did you forget? Bullocks, I do hope it’s not catching.”

“Will you stop?” he said exasperatedly. “Are you acting this way because you think you did that to me the night of the dance? Well, you didn’t. Only Voldemort can do that, and unless you happen to be a snake-man hybrid in a skirt, I doubt you had any part in my scar going crazy!”

“And how can you be so sure?!” Jade exploded back, throwing a particularly large spool of bandages across the room so hard, the sound made Ron stumble backwards, crashing to the floor, pulling down her sheets and all.

“You don’t really know me,” Jade was yelling. “I don’t even know me! You’d think you’d be worried after all the warnings about me—!” She stopped, red in the face glaring at Harry.

“What’s this?” Ron interrupted. He was still sprawled on the ground, his feet still on Jade’s bed. Her covers were wrapped around one arm and littered around him were what looked like pages torn from books. Hermione knelt down beside him and scooped up a handful of the loose parchment.

“Did you take these from the books in the Restricted Section?” Hermione asked quietly. Jade just stared at the fallen pages, her mouth ajar. She didn’t seem to notice when Harry moved to take a look at the torn parchment himself.

Hermione's eyebrows suddenly furrowed as she noticed the text and diagrams on each page. Ron pulled himself up and looked over her and Harry's shoulder. *Manifested Powers, Bound Entities, Unnatural existences*...every heading of every page Jade had allegedly ripped from the books in the Restricted Section were about Manifested Powers. Harry's throat tightened...but it was the last page that left him cold.

Hermione's hands trembled as she unearthed it from the pile. *The Jade Guardian* was written in scrolling letters across the top, and just below it were the words *The Spirit of Vengeance*: "immeasurable power yielded to its holders". Under that was a painting of a rectangular green stone on an unremarkable thin chain...it was identical to the one around Jade's neck.

"Get out," Jade growled now aware that they were staring from the picture of the pendant to the jade stone she wore. She reached up and stuffed the pendant into the neck of her robes, hiding it from view.

"How did you get that necklace?" Harry demanded quietly.

"Get out," she repeated, her voice steadily rising.

"But—," Ron and Hermione began.

"GET OUT, GET OUT, GET OUT!!" she began shrieking at the top of her lungs, spitting as she threw down the pair of scissors in her hand.

"WHAT is going on here?!" McGonagall had just burst into the wing, square spectacles askew. Her lips were pressed in a thin line at the sight of the four students. Dumont was right beside her, her gray eyes wide with curiosity.

With lightening quick moves, Jade reach forward, grabbed the papers and stuffed them into her pocket.

"Nothing," she said collectively. "Harry, Hermione, and Ron were just leaving." Harry numb with disbelief found himself apologizing and leading the way out. McGonagall continued to look from Jade to Harry and his company, looking as if she didn't quite believe the girl.

"I hope it's nothing," the Professor said straightening her glasses and returning her attention to Dumont. "What was that you were saying?"

"Just that someone's taken my sword," Dumont said, catching a glance at Jade just as she followed McGonagall out. "I know I left in Professor Lupin's class—but for some reason, it's gone missing—"

Harry didn't hear the rest of the conversation, as he, Ron, and Hermione made for the opposite direction.

\* \* \*

"Come on, Harry," Angelina urged pushing the plate of fried tomatoes and eggs under his nose. "You've got to eat if you're going to be good competition for Dina McKennett."

"Lay off, Ang," Fred huffed, uncharacteristically glum. The twins, Ginny, and Ron had been particularly down since they received news their father's award was going to be revoked. Ron was still insistent that it was Percy who ratted, and nothing Ginny said would convince him otherwise.

Angelina frowned and sat back down, reaching over and squeezing Fred's shoulder affectionately. She flashed Harry another pleading look, and just to satisfy her he grinned and choked down a mouthful of eggs.

Harry left the team breakfast early, heading back to Gryffindor common room to meet Hermione and Ron before the last match of the season that morning. He wanted to tell them all his suspicions, and reveal his dreams to them in detail...down to the unnerving appearance of Jade in his dormitory. His thoughts went back to his mother, how his parents were sent to destroy the very thing Voldemort wanted, how his mother had decided she couldn't do it, and what it all led to. What if Jade was wearing that very pendant? Was that why his scar hurt that night? But why would Dumbledore, if he knew, allow Jade, a girl with no memory, no past, into Hogwarts with such a dangerous source of magic?

“Harry, I’ve been looking for you.”

Neville Longbottom met him at the end of the corridor, looking a little pale and slightly distraught.

“Hi Neville,” Harry said, offering a weak smile. “How’d visiting your parents go?”

“Fine,” he replied attempting to return the smile, but failed. “Actually, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about.” He paused and swallowed nervously, looking as if he were inches from telling Harry to forget about it and dashing away.

“What is it?” Harry asked now curious as to what Neville had to say.

“Well, you know Professor Dumbledore came to speak with my parents last night,” he began shakily. “I wasn’t in the room, but I was outside—and I heard everything.”

“Where are you going with this, Neville?” The round-faced boy swallowed loudly, drawing in a shuddering breath.

“My mum and dad...they talked about your parents...I didn’t understand all of it, but they said that the night your parents were killed—they were out and got news that You-Know-Who knew that they had some sort of Guardian. My parents tried to get back to your parents in time to tell them to get rid of the thing—they didn’t know that the Potters were already dead—but they were intercepted by a group of Death Eaters. They wanted to know where this Guardian was.”

“Neville—,”

“The Death Eaters wanted the Guardian even after the Potters were dead, and You-Know-Who was gone—the servants didn’t want to find their Lord...they wanted to betray him. You-Know-Who was after whatever your parents had, but for some reason, your parents didn’t have it, and he was nearly destroyed.” He swallowed nervously, looking at Harry straight in the eyes.

“I thought you’d want to know...even if—” Harry shook his head and licked his lips.

“Neville...thanks.”

\* \* \*

An hour later, Harry was sitting between Hermione and Ron in the empty bleachers of the Quidditch pitch. The game wasn’t for another thirty minutes, and they had taken the opportunity for privacy to discuss Jade, Harry’s dream, and Neville’s news.

“There were Death Eaters who wanted that thing for themselves,” Ron breathed.

“D’you think that Jade has this Guardian?” Hermione said. “I know the resemblance between her pendant and the Guardian’s pendant is uncanny—but it’s as farfetched as her being dangerous.”

“Yeah,” Ron added. “If Jade really had the thing, why would Dumbledore just open Hogwart’s doors to her, pendant and all?” Harry’s brows knitted and he looked towards the green field.

“She doesn’t have any memory of what happened before she came here,” Harry said. “I’d say it’s highly unlikely Dumbledore would just let something like a powerful vessel for dark magic slip into Hogwarts under his nose...but what if he took precaution to make sure Jade wasn’t dangerous? Or what if my parents did destroy the Guardian like Snape said?”

“But then her necklace couldn’t be the Guardian—,” Ron noted.

“But then there’s something else—,” Harry added, “what if Lupin’s right? What if Jade is getting her memory back, and why she’s been getting all nutters on us is because she’s remembering why she has something Voldemort wants?”

“But if that’s true,” Hermione said slowly. “That would mean why Voldemort is back in England is—”

“To get the Guardian.”

"But she's leaving for home," Hermione insisted just as a hot breeze blew over their faces, carrying the sound of carriage wheels to their ears.

"Price is here," Ron muttered. "We should go see Jade off."

They made their way towards the front gates just in time to see the young Ministry head and surprisingly, Percy step from the carriage. Jade, McGonagall, and Dumbledore awaited them at the top of the front steps.

As they finally reached the small gathering, Harry felt Ron bristle beside him at the sight of his brother.

"Hi Ron," Percy said forcing a strained smile onto his face. "How's everythi—?"

"Why don't you ask Dad?" he asked heatedly.

"Mr. Weasley," McGonagall said weakly. "If you please..." Ron kept quiet, turning away from Percy.

"We better get started towards Hogsmeade," Price said, straightening his top hat with a gracefully movement of his hand. "Our port key—" Jade nodded emotionlessly.

"We came to say goodbye," Harry spoke up. Jade didn't look at him, Ron, or Hermione. Instead she turned to Dumbledore and McGonagall and said, "Thank you for everything." Dumbledore winced apologetically at Harry, catching his eye for a second before he directed his gaze back onto Jade.

"Your things have been sent and will be waiting for you when you arrive," Dumbledore explained to her. He reached out an ancient hand and firmly shook her's.

"Well, looks like we should be off," Price spoke up, and Dumbledore let her go. She turned and followed Percy and Price down the steps.

"And Jade," Dumbledore called. "If you remember who you are, I promise no one here will forget. I hope you and your parents won't hesitate to schedule your return." She barely turned her head to acknowledge the words and pressed on, passing Hermione, Ron, and Harry without so much as glance. They watched her go, disappointed and confused.

Harry looked up at Dumbledore, wondering if the wizened form knew of his fear.

"We can only try to do good for others," the Headmaster said looking down at the three. "And you all have done admirably."

"Potter," McGonagall spoke up softly. "I believe you've got a game in a few minutes."

Harry nodded and walked towards the pitch. He left Ron and Hermione at the locker rooms and went down to fetch his Firebolt and hear Angelina's pep talk. He didn't really comprehend a word she was saying...there were things other than Quidditch on his mind, even if this game was with Hufflepuff—who's captain happened to be Cedric Diggory's cousin, Dina McKennett. Much less excited than usually, he followed the uncommonly quiet Weasley twins onto the pitch. Jade had left, he thought, and he'd never understand why she had become the way she was...and he hated to admit a part of him was glad she was gone. Even if she had the Guardian, knew how to use it, she and that damned rock his parents died for where gone.

Madam Hooch's whistle sent all fourteen players rocketing into the air.

"AAAAAAAAND THEY'RE OFF!" Lee Jordan announced.

Harry dived around the players, dodged bludgers, and found himself applauding McKennett's seeker prowess. He'd dare say she was better than Cho, who was quite good. He forced himself to pay attention to the game enough to eventually catch sight of a flicker of gold in the bright sunlight. McKennett, however, had already spotted it and began shooting upwards. Instinctively, Harry darted towards it, pressing his body low over his broom. He reached out as the snitch's wiskery wings whipped it away, feeling the sandy-haired, Hufflepuff seeker right beside him. They were both so close, it could go either way—Lee was screaming over the loud speaker.

BOOM!

A thunderous crack resounded so violently through the air, Harry could feel the shockwave ripple beneath him. Beside him, Dina gasped.

A familiar, faint tingle began to burn a trail along Harry's scar. The crowd had grown eerily silent as all eyes turned towards Hogsmeade.

"We're under attack!" Somebody suddenly screamed from far away. Harry winced, and pressed his hand to his head, hardly able to believe the sight before him.

The dark mark, in all its menacing glory, was glowing brightly over Hogwart's neighboring village.

## 24. The Devil's Advocate

Harry had his hand pressed against his scar long after the faint tingle had passed as he stared off towards Hogsmeade. The green glow of the dark mark sneered brilliantly even in the morning sunshine.

A shrill whistle caught his attention. Madam Hooch was flying quickly about, rounding in all the players who landed with startled expressions marked with fear on their faces. Harry followed right behind Fred and George who were both pale, clutching at their broomsticks nervously.

Everyone was facing the exit where Albus Dumbledore stood, fierceness in his benevolent demeanor. His voice was suddenly magnified to echo across the entire stadium though it was hardly needed, as everyone was quite silent on the pitch. So much so that screams of terrorized citizens could be heard from Hogsmeade.

“Teachers lead everyone to the dungeons,” Dumbledore said his voice thunderous and even. “Then meet me in the Great Hall for your duties. All staff that are head of houses, please first make a sweep of your common rooms. Be sure every student is accounted for.”

There was not one utterance of a question or protest as the teachers began to herd the students through the exit, hurrying them out of the stadium.

“Quick and orderly!” McGonagall called over their heads, her stolid face betrayed by a faint quiver in her voice. Harry was forced along as the reality slowly sunk in. He began searching for Ron and Hermione, but there was no sign of them. For a moment, not one face seemed very familiar and the feeling of being very alone suddenly swept over him. It quickly passed however, as Hagrid’s form came into view.

“Hagrid,” Harry said, pushing his way past a group of students. “Hagrid—,”

“I know Harry,” the half-giant said. The drawn tightness of his voice made his ferocious size seem to shrink. He looked down at Harry, the beetle-black eyes wide with fear.

“Just go on now, do what you’re told,” he said, reaching out and patting Harry reassuringly on the shoulder. Harry nodded stiffly and allowed himself to be swept away by the crowd. Could the Dark Mark mean Voldemort was back—in Hogsmeade less than a few steps away from Hogwart’s grounds? Harry thought. The dark calling card hadn’t been seen since Karkaroff’s murder last winter when Sirius said the Death Eater movement had been strongest. And then Harry remembered something.

Jade.

Feeling as if his stomach had just dropped a hundred stories, he began to force his way through the sea of students in search of Dumbledore. Jade had said her portkey was set for ten, Harry reasoned. It was well after ten now, she must have already gone, hadn’t she?

As he broke free of the crowd just outside the castle, he saw a woman accompanied by a large black dog racing towards the head of the crowd. Without wasting a moment for thought, Harry dashed towards the strange duo as they headed for Dumbledore.

“Arabella,” the Headmaster said not bother to hide his surprise as the woman swept urgently up to his side.

“Professor,” she panted. “We—we didn’t know. They must of put us off their trail—the Death Eaters must think you have the pendant—”

“I’ve realized,” Dumbledore interrupted her. “Quickly now, inside.”

“There’s something else,” Figg gasped. “There was a surprise attack in London on the Minister’s home...the Death Eaters have taken Cornelius Fudge hostage.” Dumbledore paused, turning to face her.

“Maybe he’ll believe us now,” he said sadly before pushing the last of the students and teachers in. In all the hustle, they didn’t see Harry trailing right behind them, but the black, four-legged creature beside Figg did.

Sirius barked and bounded towards Harry, attempting to push him back in line with the other students who were now pouring towards the dungeons.

“No, Sirius,” Harry muttered. “Jade—she’s—”

Sirius barked again, calling for Dumbledore and Figg’s attention. The headmaster turned, not looking the least bit surprised by Harry’s departure from the crowd.

“Harry, whatever it is, I think it best if you follow everyone to the dungeons,” Dumbledore said firmly.

“But what about Jade?” Harry insisted. “She’s in Hogsmeade—”

Before Dumbledore could more resolutely repeat his request, Professor Trelawney swept down the stairs looking agitated and excited all at once. Professor Sinistra was right behind her pinching the bridge of her nose as if the few moments spent retrieving the Divinations professor had resulted in a migraine.

“I knew!” Trelawney announced loudly in a wispy tone. She was cradling her crystal ball and tarot cards.

“I saw a dark shadow in my morning tarot reading—all the omens pointed to this—”

“Kind of you not to tell us a little earlier, Sybill,” McGonagall snapped the irritation in her voice knocking all fear from her face. “Could you see yourself maybe joining the rest of the staff in the Great Hall?” Trelawney’s lips pursed and her eyes narrowed dangerously behind the magnifying lenses of her bejeweled spectacles. She was about to retort when Dumbledore interrupted.

“I think that this is not the time,” he said firmly. The Divination professor turned to look at the Headmaster but gasped at sight of Harry.

“My dear child!” she wailed clutching the crystal ball to her chest. “If You-Know-Who is here—then these next moments may very well be your very last! Why are you not being better protected?” Despite himself, Harry raised an incredulous eyebrow.

“If you would please join the rest of the staff,” McGonagall inserted firmly. “I’m sure the Headmaster will make sure Potter doesn’t die.”

Trelawney was only successfully led away after both McGonagall and Sinistra firmly dragged her towards the Great Hall.

“I’m asking you, Harry,” Dumbledore said gently as Trelawney’s lamentations faded away. “Please join the rest of your peers in the dungeons.”

“But Jade—” Harry declared stubbornly seeing the disapproving glare evident in Sirius’s eyes despite his doggy state. “She’s out there in Hogsmeade and she’s got the Guardian.”

Arabella Figg’s eyeballs threatened to roll out of their sockets as she stared at him bewilderedly. The few teachers that remained in the entrance hall clucked their tongues disapprovingly at Harry’s forwardness but all of them looked as though they thought he had suffered yet another terrible shock. From near the back of the small gathering of staff members, he could make out Hagrid and Lupin looking worriedly at him.

Dumbledore stiffened, looking at Harry with an expression more of understanding than surprise. With a slow blink brightening the twinkle in his eye, he nodded.

“Perhaps then, Harry, you could do me the favor of escorting Ms Figg’s dog to the side chamber so that we might get on with our urgent business,” he said before turning to the teachers. “Please, to the Great Hall then—the time is upon us.”

Harry swallowed hard, feeling the sweat begin to trickle down his back; it was less from the stifling heat and more from the panic that his presumption about Jade's necklace was very correct and that Voldemort would get it if he hadn't already. Pulling off his scarlet robes he led the black dog to the side chamber of the Great Hall. He shut the door behind them and turned to find his godfather standing before him.

"Why don't you ever do as you're told?" Sirius said, the anger in his voice reflecting worry for his godson. "Do you know who might very well be out there right now?"

"Yes, I do," Harry returned more bitterly than he meant. "I saw the dark mark too, I'm not bloody blind." He regretted his words instantly at the look that fell over his godfather's face. Sirius turned and pressed a hand over his eyes as if trying to block out the faint light of the chamber.

"I can't believe this is happening," he muttered, puffing a breath out from between his clenched teeth. Without bothering to look at Harry, he asked, "how'd you know about the Guardian?"

"So it's true then," Harry breathed. "That is the Guardian Jade has around her neck—"

"We don't know for sure," he replied awkwardly. "But that is the suspicion, yes."

"And that's why Voldemort's back?"

"We weren't even sure Voldemort knew about the Guardian until today," Sirius answered clenching his fist and tapping his toe as if aching to sprint to Hogseade and join the fight. "The Death Eaters that have stormed the Minister's home in London have demanded the Guardian in return for his life—but the Minister's convince it doesn't exist—that it was destroyed."

"But it wasn't, was it?"

There was more long silence.

"No."

Harry's mouth went slack and he turned and fumbled for a chair. Cornelius Fudge was being held hostage for the Guardian, Hogsmeade was under attack because the Death Eaters wanted to get into Hogwarts, and Jade's innocence—or life—was in question. All because his mother refused to destroy the unimpressive green stone that Jade now possessed.

"What happened that night my parents went after the Guardian, Sirius?" Harry asked shaking his head.

"This is hardly the time."

"I at least deserve to know why they died."

Sirius caught Harry's gaze unsteadily. He hesitated before pulling up a chair across from his godson and sitting down.

"Fourteen years ago, Dumbledore received news from his spy within Voldemort's inside circles that this Jade Guardian not only existed, but was located by the Death Eaters. Dumbledore informed the Ministry about the possibility of the existence. Fudge wanted to send out an expedition for the Guardian immediately—not to destroy it, but to use it in the fight against the dark mark."

"Why didn't my parents hand it over to the Ministry after they got it then?"

"And give immeasurable power to a group of elite that was riddled with Voldemort's spies and corrupt men? Dumbledore knew that the Guardian wouldn't be used just for defeating Voldemort—not that the Minister intended for anything otherwise. Corruption is the nature of men. Power is what transformed a man into a thing like Voldemort."

"So Dumbledore decided to destroy it," Harry said.

"Yes," Sirius replied. "He asked your parents to do it, having worked very close with them in their days of Auror training. They were among the top crusaders in the war against the Dark Lord: young, capable of youthful action but not prone to ignorant recklessness."

“They went after the Guardian, Lily successfully took possession of it. They were nearly stopped by eight Death Eaters—but we were wrong to assume that Voldemort knew where the pendant was. The eight were among a small minority within Voldemort’s circle that had tracked down the pendant for themselves. You see, Harry, the Guardian’s power is of such potency that, whomever can get their hands on it, gets anything they desire. If they could get to it first, they could take power over Voldemort and his wrath wouldn’t be felt.”

“In the end, an accidental rockslide left two of the Death Eaters dead and spared James and Lily’s life. Afterwards, Dumbledore staged the Guardian’s elimination and both the Ministry and Voldemort bought it.”

“But why did he fake it?” Harry asked bewildered, “why didn’t my mum want to really destroy the damn thing?” As he spoke, Frank Longbottom’s words suddenly filled his ears: *James, listen—they know, You-Know-Who knows. You tell Lily to get rid of it. Dear god, just get rid of it.*

Sirius didn’t answer. Instead he looked down at his interlaced hands, staring at the filthy fingernails.

“I don’t know why,” he finally said, his hackles rising slightly in bitter hurt and resentment, “but Peter did.”

Harry was momentarily dumbstruck staring at his godfather’s pained expression.

“That was the secret that rat kept,” Harry finally managed slowly. “That was how Peter Pettigrew betrayed my parents as their Secret Keeper—he told Voldemort that the Guardian wasn’t destroyed by Dumbledore—that my parents had it.”

“Yes.”

“But they didn’t have it the night Voldemort killed them,” Harry insisted. “If they did, Voldemort would be ruling over everything and I’d be dead.”

“Could you not say things like that?” Sirius said grimacing.

“Sorry,” Harry said whole-heartedly, kicking himself for his lack of sensitivity. They sat in each other’s company for a few silent minutes.

“But how did Jade get a hold of the Guardian?” Harry asked quietly.

“I don’t know,” Sirius said. “It’s just a suspicion that she has it.”

“That’s why you warned me about her; it was because she had it all this time—right here in Hogwarts.”

“We didn’t know straight away—it was just so unlikely.”

“But even if Dumbledore thought it was possible she had the thing,” Harry insisted, “why would he let her stay?”

“He wouldn’t refuse her on a presumption, Harry,” Sirius answered. “And if there was a chance her necklace turned out to be the Jade Guardian, then what better place to keep it under wraps then Hogwarts?”

Harry fell silent, dropping his scarlet quidditch robes to the floor beside him. He was thinking about the night of the Promenade, the shocking pain that had followed Jade’s touch—she had this great source of dark power the whole time. Was Lupin right in assuming she was getting her memory back? And if she was—

“Sirius,” Harry said. “Do you think—do you think Jade could somehow be along the ranks of Voldemort?”

“No,” Sirius answered quickly. “No, I—I don’t think that.”

“What do you think?”

“I think—” his godfather paused thoughtfully, running his fingers through his now short and disheveled hair. “I think there are a lot of questions we don’t have answers to about her.”

"Jade's not a Death Eater or something," Harry said. He wasn't sure if he was meaning to convince his godfather or himself, but either way, he wanted to believe it. "All she's been is a loyal friend." Sirius didn't answer.

"But whatever her nature is," Harry muttered. "It doesn't stop the fact that Voldemort is after what she has, does it?" Before Sirius could answer, the chamber doors creaked open.

Dumbledore crossed the threshold followed by Lupin, looks of disquieting somberness blanketing both their features.

"I'm leading Arabella, Minerva, Lupin, Hagrid, and several other professors down to Hogsmeade to join the Ministry Aurors that are most likely on their way. The rest of the staff have been assigned to different posts around the castle—as for you Sirius, I need you also to stay."

"What?!" the former Azkaban prisoner exclaimed leaping to his feet. "You can't ask me to stay when Voldemort could very well be less than a half a mile away!"

"There'll be aurors out there, Padfoot," Lupin said calmly, "and you're still a wanted man."

He reached forward and rested a reassuring hand on his friends shoulder. Sirius's hands clenched and he ducked away from Lupin. He turned and faced the unlit fireplace, every muscle tense.

"We need you here, Sirius," Dumbledore said earnestly. "You are among one of our most able fighters—you must be here to defend the students if it leads to that. Put aside your need of vengeance for them. For Harry." Black didn't answer. Instead he continued to stare into the fireplace, examining the remains of a fire long since put out.

"As for you Harry," Dumbledore said acknowledging his presence. "It is time that you join your peers in the dungeons."

"But what about Jade?" Harry said standing up. "Please tell me their portkey was for ten this morning, that they've already left." The wizen form before him shifted as if shouldering the weight of the question.

"Mr. Price and Jade were to leave Hogwarts by ten in order to meet with the Transportation representatives that would be setting up their portkey," he answered. "They were set to transport by noon."

Harry's jaw dropped.

Jade, along with the very thing Voldemort was after, may very well still be in Hogsmeade.

\* \* \*

A few minutes later Harry stood before the entrance of the Slytherin common room. He had just watched Dumbledore lead a group of teachers out of the front doors. They were in such a hurry; Hagrid could only flash Harry a brief smile. Harry could only watch the small group led by the Headmaster leave, hoping against hope that Dumbledore could set things right in Hogsmeade—that somehow Voldemort wouldn't get to Jade's pendent first.

He also hoped that Jade would be okay. He didn't know what he thought about her anymore, after knowing she had the Guardian, and after receiving so many warnings—and especially after the Promenade. But he knew that he didn't want her to be in danger; that somehow she deserved to get out of Hogsmeade safely and home to her parents. At least he would not have to worry so much about Sirius. Despite his godfather's fury at being asked to stay at Hogwarts while others went to join the fight in Hogsmeade, Harry was comforted by his presence.

Sirius was currently prowling the grounds with Lupin who was directed by Dumbledore to reinforce all the major magical defense mechanisms around the castle before meeting the rest of the assigned staff in Hogsmeade.

Harry stepped into the dungeon common room—it was chilly despite the merry flames in the fireplace. It was a strange sight to say the least: Slytherins and Gryffindors were huddled amongst each other, neither groups exchanging conversation but both houses married by their common fear.

The Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws as well as the other staff members that were unaccounted for in the Slytherin's common room were being housed in a large lecture hall just down the dungeon corridor as the entire population of Hogwarts could hardly fit into one room. Harry had overheard the arrangements discussed by McGonagall and Dumbledore as he was hurried down to the dungeons just minutes before.

He pushed his way through the group of students in search of Ron and Hermione, noticing the staff was surveying the room nervously. No one was talking except Dumont who was biting her nails and repeatedly announcing that her sword was no where to be found to Madam Pomfrey who looked as if she hardly heard what the slightly off woman was saying.

"Harry!"

Hermione appeared before him, her eyes glassy with both fear and relief. She ran forward and flung her arms around him.

"Oh Harry!" she said clinging painfully tight to his neck. "When we couldn't find you—I thought—I thought—" She didn't finish. Instead she pushed herself away from him. Beside her, Ron stood, face pale, staring with a mixture of both relief and anger at his friend.

"Where the hell were you Harry?" he hissed weakly. "God, what we thought when we got here and nobody could tell us where you were—"

"Sorry," Harry answered earnestly, before leaning in close and adding, "Snuffles is here—I was speaking with him."

"So you know what's going on?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, for the most part anyway."

Harry looked up and noticed that they were in much too close of a proximity to so many people to be safely discussing Sirius and the happenings in both Hogsmeade and London.

"Not here," he said turning in hopes of spotting a quiet, deserted corner. However, the room was filled to maximum occupancy. Harry wound a path through the group of students, turning back every so often to make sure Ron and Hermione were right behind him. However, in his haste, he plowed right into someone who had been standing in his way.

"Sorry," he muttered and looked up to find Draco Malfoy staring back at him—it was not the usual collected, malicious face Harry had come to know. Malfoy looked even paler than normal. His face was drawn, and his gray eyes were wide—it took Harry a moment to realize that his archenemy was afraid.

As they stood before each other, the opposition that often brought tensions to near breaking points seemed obsolete: the enmity between Slytherins and Gryffindors, Draco and Harry meant nothing compared to the bigger fight up there in the real world. How truly childish they were to believe that there was nothing more real or important than their rivalry.

"What Potter?" Malfoy attempted to sneer soon recognizing who it was facing him. His words, however, had never sounded less threatening.

"Where's the loo?" Harry blurted out, unable to get over the fear he saw in Malfoy's eyes. Malfoy seemed a bit taken aback by the question and hastily pointed towards a stairwell to the left of them. Harry nodded and poked Ron to get him to move.

"Potter," Malfoy called before they had reached the brightly lit staircase. Harry paused and turned around finding Lucious's son flanked by his now stolid faced companions.

"I'd watch my back if I were you." Without an answer, Harry pressed on.

It was unclear as to whether or not Malfoy's words were a threat or a warning.

"Did you see his face?" Ron said as they descended down the pleasant stairwell.

"He looked a bit scared," Hermione said, surprise clear in her voice. "But his father—"

“I know,” Harry said.

They reached the last step and found themselves in a long corridor lined with dormitories for the Slytherin boys on either side.

“Looks like it’s down there,” Harry said and led them towards the end of the corridor where they faced a door marked “Lavatory”. Ron pushed it open and stepped in, holding it for the others. Hermione didn’t move and instead averted her gaze, suddenly looking very uncomfortable.

“Well, go on,” Ron said with a huff.

“I can’t,” she said flatly.

“Why not?” Harry asked, wondering if her foot was stuck on some Drooble’s Best Blowing Gum or something.

“It’s just that—,” Hermione sucked in a breath “—I’ve never been in a boy’s bathroom before.” Ron rolled his eyes looking very impatient.

“Well, there’s a first time for everything,” he said before grabbing her hand and yanking her across the threshold. Harry followed, locking the door behind them.

“Congratulations, you’ve now official been in a boy’s bathroom,” Ron announced.

“Ron!” Hermione gasped furiously. “What if there had been somebody *in here*!?”

“Ah, but there wasn’t.”

“That was highly inappropriate!”

“Oh, and it was okay for me and Harry to be brewing Polyjuice potion in the girl’s bathroom with you?”

“Yes, because I instigated that and it was for something important!”

“Don’t mean to interrupt,” Harry said loudly, feeling very irritated, “but we didn’t exactly come here for a little insignificant chat.”

The bickering stopped, but both Ron and Hermione moved away from each other and situated themselves on either side of Harry. Sighing inwardly, Harry proceeded to tell them about the attack on Hogsmeade, the truth about the Guardian’s existence, the hostage situation involving the Minister, and the news that Jade, whom he was nearly positive had the pendant, may very well still be in the village.

“No,” Hermione said quietly. “Are you sure?”

“She wasn’t s’pose to leave Hogsmeade until noon,” Harry answered, sloppily pushing his hand through his hair in frustration.

“Oh no,” Ron muttered. He had grown considerably pale, and a visible shiver racked his body. Hermione and Harry grabbed his arms to steady him as he shook his head in disbelief.

“What is it?” Hermione asked worriedly. “Ron?”

“Percy,” he mumbled weakly. “Percy—that means Percy’s still in Hogsmeade too. He and Price.”

Hermione looked from Ron to Harry, her brown eyes begging him to tell them that it wasn’t true. Harry just shook his head, considering Percy and Price’s chances in a town being ravaged by Death Eaters as they were currently in company with a girl that had what Voldemort wanted.

“Percy’ll be fine,” Harry said firmly. “He’s a—”

“Goner!” Ron wailed. “He’s out there with Death Eaters. What’s he going to do? Confiscate their thin-bottomed cauldrons?” He swallowed dryly and stiffly pried his arms out of their grasp.

“Dumbledore’s out there, too,” Harry said. “He’ll take care of everything.”

“God, what if something happens to Percy?” Ron muttered clearly not listening. “After all the times I’ve yelled at him—”

"And your special sibling relationship can continue as soon as he gets back," Hermione said helpfully.

"There are aurors out there too," Harry said. "Percy's going to be fine, he can defend himself—he was Head Boy, remember?"

"Wasn't Cedric Diggory Head Boy?"

The voice startled all three of them. Their heads whipped round so that they faced the stall where it seemed to be coming from. Moaning Myrtle appeared from the porcelain bowl, her silver face looking as morose and depressed as ever.

"He was a prefect," Harry said without thinking, startled by her sudden appearance. As the words left his mouth, however, he found himself pained by the small reminder of Cedric.

"Well, in any case," Myrtle said huffily. "That didn't stop him from dying, did it?"

"That's not very sensitive!" Hermione exclaimed both surprised and angered by Myrtle's brashness.

"I was just being truthful," she retorted dejectedly. "I didn't mean to offend anyone."

"What are you doing here anyway?" Harry asked having recovered from the shock and grown irritated.

"Well, if you haven't heard," Myrtle replied. "You-Know-Who and his follower aren't exactly very far from Hogwarts. I don't want to be in my unprotected toilet when he comes."

"What do you care?" Ron shot. "You're already dead!"

"Talk about insensitivity!" she wailed, tears slowly starting to leak from her eyes. "I didn't want to be up there alone!"

"Don't cry," Hermione said stiffly, her face straining in the effort to be kind. "You have every right to leave your toilet."

"Sorry," Harry muttered sardonically, "I guess having your life threatened could put you in a slightly off mood."

"Again with the 'life' jokes!" Myrtle cried out, though her tears had dried. "There are worst things than death you know!"

"Like being stuck in a stall with her," Ron mumbled under his breath.

"You could have your soul sucked out of you by a dementor," Myrtle was saying having clearly not heard Ron's comment. "Or you—you could be forced to live a half-life, or you could die then have your essence captured and bound to something—trust me, there are things many times worse than death." She moved towards them obviously excited by her growing list of worst fates.

"Your essence bound to something?" Harry muttered looking up at her transparent face. "Myrtle, you don't know anything about Manifested Existences, do you?"

"No."

"Dead useful, you are," Ron muttered.

"I don't have to take this!" Myrtle exclaimed. "Making hurtful puns at me—DEAD useful is right! I hope you do get dealt a half-life or something equally terrible!" With an ear-splitting wail, she dived with a splash back into the toilet to find another safe u-bend to sulk in.

As the last of Myrtle's wails faded to a dull echo, Ron slid to the floor his ridiculously long legs sprawled before him. Harry and Hermione joined him, and for a moment they all just stared off in the direction of Myrtle's latest haunting. Suddenly, Harry growled miserably and buried his head in his hands. All those dreams about his parents that had both pleased and tormented him—they all came down to the fact that the Guardian still existed and Voldemort could now get his hands on it. If that happened, his parents would have died in vain. So many would have died in vain.

And it was Jade who had it. What did that mean for everyone?

"I think we should go back now," Hermione finally spoke up. "We've been down here an awfully long time."

Harry and Ron didn't say a word as they stood and led the way toward the door. Harry unlocked it and eased it open, before stepping back and promptly shutting it again.

"What gives?" Ron demanded.

Harry put his finger to his lips before cracking the door and crouching down so that Hermione and Ron could see out into the hall as well. Several yards away, Dumont was clutching at Professor Lupin's robes having just dragged him down into the corridor.

"What is it, Professor?" Lupin said, a slight edge to his usual calm demeanor.

"I was right, wasn't I?" Dumont said, eyes glinting with a fierce excitement that unsettled Harry. He had grown steadily suspicious of the bizarre woman since having witnessed her lying about Jade's illegal tramp to the Restricted section a few nights ago.

"This isn't a competition, Dumont," Lupin said pointedly.

"You have to tell me," she said her gray eyes flashing behind her oblong frames. "You-Know-Who's here because of the Guardian, isn't he? My suspicions were right, weren't they?" Lupin didn't answer. Instead he seemed to be sizing her up, as if noticing her peculiarities for the first time.

"Whether your suspicions about the girl were right or wrong should hardly be your concern," Lupin said in a voice so firm and cold that it made Hermione gasp. "Do you know what's at stake now? A girl's destiny along with all of our futures—and because Hogwarts was responsible for her, if Voldemort gets the Guardian, it'll be our fault." He turned, wand drawn, and began to proceed up the steps.

"Maybe Dumbledore should have thought about that before taking her in," Dumont returned, the icy, quick-witted tone of her sarcasm clashing abominably with her usual impartial and senseless nature. Lupin paused and turned his head to look over his shoulder.

"Dumbledore's aim was to solve the problem, not to send it off to someone else less competent to take care of it."

And with that he disappeared, obviously finished with his defense duties on the grounds and his conversation with Dumont.

Dumont was silent, staring off in the direction Lupin had departed in. She was uncharacteristically collected, a small smile suddenly appearing on her face. What she said next nearly caused Harry to tumble backwards.

"So I've brought the Dark Lord to Hogwarts."

With slow, sure steps she began to make her way out of the corridor and up the stairs. Harry pushed back, letting the door close, turning to find his astonishment reflected in Ron and Hermione's faces.

"Sirius told me Voldemort didn't know the Guardian still existed," Harry said quickly. "Dumont must have told him—she was here all this time, she knew about Dumbledore's suspicions—all those arguments with Snape—" Harry pushed his hands through his hair and threw open the door, hurrying down the hall back towards the Slytherin common room, Hermione and Ron rushing after him.

"But Dumont—," Hermione stuttered. "One of Voldemort's servants? He killed her parents! Drove her insane!"

Harry wasn't listening. He was taking care to lead them out of the stairwell unseen. The common room was a bit noisier than before, but the mood was hardly merry. The staff members assigned to the room were explaining the situation to the students who were huddled around them, anxiously asking questions about the Dark Mark over Hogsmeade. They didn't notice Dumont crouching in the shadows near the exit, aiming her wand at an empty armchair situated by the fireplace across the large room.

“What’s she doing?” Ron muttered. He was answered when the emerald-colored chair toppled to its end in the flames. There were yelps and cries of surprise as it quickly caught fire, but Harry hardly noticed, watching as Dumont slipped through the exit.

No longer having any pretense of danger or fear, he dashed after her. Before he could make it to the exit however, Hermione and Ron had grabbed his arms.

“What are you doing!” she demanded, hissing at him with eyes glistening. “If what you say is true—she could be dangerous!”

“She’s up to something,” Harry returned ripping from their grasps. “She’s the reason why the Dark Mark went up!” He was angry now; Dumont was the one who set the stage for Voldemort’s securing of the pendant—she could make his parents’ death be in that of vain. He pressed against the stone wall and slipped through, Hermione and Ron tumbling after him.

Outside of the Slytherin common room, the stone working slid shut, and they were plunged into the dim-light of the dungeons, listening to the quickly receding footfalls of Dumont. Harry, motioning Ron and Hermione to be quiet, pressed forward until they reached the entrance hall landing just in time to see the crazed woman darting up the grand staircase.

“What d’you think she’s up to?” Ron muttered. They made after her, carefully keeping their distant. Harry was a bit surprised to find she had led them to the gargoyle outside Dumbledore’s office.

“Licorice Wand,” Dumont said firmly and the Gargoyle leaped aside. She swept up the revolving steps faster than they could whirl her. Harry didn’t follow, allowing the stone statue to leap back into place; he didn’t dare get himself, Ron, and Hermione caught by the woman in an enclosed space.

Before Dumont returned, heavy footsteps echoed through the corridor.

“Quick,” Harry hissed. “Hide!” Green eyes darting in all directions, he followed Ron and Hermione across the hall where they dived into what appeared to be a broom closet. The other person had reached level with their hiding place just as the scrap of stone on stone signaled Dumont’s reappearance from Dumbledore’s office.

“What in the bloody hell are you doing?” The man cried out, Harry instantly recognizing his voice to be that of his godfather’s.

“Give me the sword!” Sirius was demanding. “You can’t make this situation better!” Before he could say more, a thud sounded, like that of a bludger hitting a player’s body and Sirius yelped as he crashed to the floor.

“It’s my duty now to kill the girl,” Dumont hissed. “We’ll see what I make of this situation after I get the Guardian.” And with that, she muttered “Reducto!” Sirius grunted as the curse hit him, sliding his body across the corridor. Hidden away, Harry grimaced and balled his hands into fist painfully tight: it took all of his strength to not burst out upon the woman.

A few seconds passed and inside the dark closet, they heard Dumont’s much lighter footsteps begin to fade as she turned to depart. Nearly unable to wait for her to completely disappear, Harry flung open the door to find Sirius sprawled sloppily on the ground.

“Sirius,” Harry breathed, kneeling next to his godfather. Blood was pouring from a cut opened across an already purpling bruise on his temple.

“Is he—?” Hermione said worriedly. Ron knelt across from Harry and nervously held his hand over Black’s nose and mouth.

“He’s breathing all right,” Ron answered shakily. “I think he’s just knocked out.”

“Did you hear what Dumont said?” Harry muttered. “She’s going to go to Hogsmeade—I wouldn’t believe it before—but I think she’s more then capable of getting Jade’s necklace. I’ve got to go warn Dumbledore.”

“No, Harry,” Hermione said pleadingly, instantly catching his drift. “We could go tell a teacher—”

"And wait for them to wise up while Dumont hands Voldemort that *thing*?" Harry returned angrily.  
"While she kills Jade?" She was instantly silenced.

Harry turned back to his godfather momentarily before pushing himself to his feet.

"I have to go find Dumbledore," Harry repeated.

"We'll come with you," Ron blurted out. Despite his firm tone, Harry could see Ron's frame shaking with terror.

"No," Harry said shaking his head resolutely. "Go tell the teachers—" This time, Harry was silenced as Hermione had drawn her wand and was now directing it right at his chest.

"If we don't go with you," she said determinedly though her eyes were full of tears. "Then you don't go at all."

Harry looked at Hermione, who was looking true to her word, and Ron who was straightening bravely to his full height. He had wanted so badly to spare them from the pain he had endured last year upon facing the wrath of the Dark Lord. But he knew that Ron and Hermione, being as true and loyal as they were, would rather endure much more to prevent Harry facing that sort of thing alone ever again. Half irritated by their stubbornness, half relieved for their company, he nodded.

"To the one-eyed witch then."

\* \* \*

A quarter of an hour later, Ron was pushing open the trap door hidden in the basement of Honeyduke's Sweetshop. Harry had used the secret passage that they had just tromped through mostly to sneak into Hogsmeade undetected during his third year. Today he was using it to get into a village where the first battle of Voldemort's return was taking place. After Hermione had climbed out after him, they walked with trepidation towards the door that would lead into the candy shop. Even before Harry opened it, he could hear the sounds of screams, pleas, and destruction taking place in the small, wizarding community.

"I think your parents were right in wanting you home, Hermione," Ron said sounding as if he were suddenly queasy. They stood there and examined their surroundings. The store itself was currently deserted. Items were strewn everywhere, and there were dark black marks on the whitewashed walls where curses were ducked. But outside, people were fleeing in all directions as figures in masked hoods prowled among them like tourist in an amusement park.

"Oh god," Hermione gasped as a woman was struck with the crucio curse and fell to the road several feet in front of the store. Before the Avada Kedavra curse could be administered, the woman was saved by another woman dressed in fitted robes marked on the breast by three lines and a scrolling "A". The Ministry Aurors had arrived.

"We got to find Dumbledore," Harry reminded them, swallowing thickly. "Keep an eye out, and blend in as much as possible."

With that, Ron, Hermione, and Harry slipped from Honeydukes into the ensuing chaos. Above them, the Dark Mark continued to glow even in the hot sunlight. They ducked into shops and behind carriages every time a group of Death Eaters passed—there was no doubt Harry would be an added bonus to Voldemort's taking possession of the Guardian.

"Where d'you think Dumbledore would be?" Hermione asked pale with fright.

"I dunno," Harry muttered, leading them past a bon fire made up of robes from the vandalized Gladrags. He was concentrating so hard on avoiding Death Eaters, the groups of injured wizards and witches huddled in the eves that lined the lane, and finding the tall, wizened form of Dumbledore he could hardly breath. Harry glanced in every direction and finally spotted something that only made him more desperate for the Headmaster's presence.

A block away from where they stood, Price was running full speed towards the Hog's Head, a pub with a rough scene that Hagrid often frequented. Price's face was strained and his characteristic top hat was long gone. In one hand he clutched an old boot to his chest, and with the other, he was holding onto Jade's hand. Her face was blank in the wake of all the destruction, and she followed with a sort of indifferent effort. Beside her, Percy, visibly pale even from that distance, was running and gazing at his watch, throwing furtive glances over his shoulder every few steps.

"One more minute!" he cried out, his voice cracking and his composure threatening to crack as Price stopped in front of him.

"In there!" Price yelled, pulling Jade roughly towards the pub.

"Percy," Ron gasped at the sight of his brother. Harry barely noticed Percy, as his attention was on Jade. He hoped with all his heart that it was a portkey in Price's hand, and that they would make it out of Hogsmeade safely. Just a few more seconds—

It seemed they had been running from Dumont who appeared a few seconds later, racing towards Price, Jade, and Percy, swinging a familiar gold sword skillfully in her hands.

"No," Harry muttered shaking his head. "No, she's going to stop them." And he was off, sprinting towards Jade and her companions. Dumont was so much closer, all Harry could do was pump his legs as fast as he could, but there was no way he was going to reach them first.

"NO!" Price cried out as he spotted his sister, pushing Jade and Percy behind him. Harry was nearly there, they were just feet away. He wasn't going to let Dumont get that pendant or kill his friend. But it was too late, the woman was there her left hand wrapping around a handful of Price's robes, swinging back Godric Gryffindor's sword like a deadly pendulum ready to deal the blow.

"STOP!" Harry yelled furiously throwing himself at Dumont. In that moment, there was a swooshing sound, and all four of them were gone. Harry landed hard in the dirt, his face reflecting his disbelief. Dumont had Jade. There was nothing he could do. The Guardian was as good as Voldemort's.

Harry pounded his fist into the dirt, ignoring the fact that he was grinding gravel into his scraped palms. So many had died to bring down the horror of the Dark Lord and because of his mother's ridiculous desire to not destroy a stupid rock, his own blood, that stupid Triwizard tournament, and one pitiful servant it would all be for nothing. Voldemort was right—all attempts at defense, his mother's death—it only bought Harry time.

"Percy! That loony's got them!" Ron yelled. He looked panicked, but at the sight of his friend he struggled to regain his composure and he and Hermione reached down to pull Harry up.

As soon as he was up on his feet, Harry jerked from their grasps, suddenly becoming once more aware of the turmoil around him. He had failed to save another life. If Dumont got the pendant, Jade was dead.

"Harry," Hermione said urgently.

"We need Dumbledore," Harry muttered.

"No," she said more urgently. She grabbed his arm so tight that the discomfort made him look up.

Several feet in front of them, standing in front of the Hog's Head, a figure in a masked cloak was staring at them, wand drawn.

Harry didn't think. All he wanted was that figure to be Voldemort so that he could kill him. He wanted to kill Voldemort as much as the Dark Lord wanted to kill him, and in that split second as he lunged at the cloaked figure, Harry felt that the first steps of revenge were being taken.

Harry collided hard with the masked man and they both crashed through the front window of the pub. Glass rained down on them, as he struggled to right himself, feeling as if his lungs had been crushed. Pushing up blinding, his fingers hooked around the Death Eater's mask and as he thrust himself off of the man, the hood slid off. Harry roughly pushed his glasses back on, breathing hard. He threw the hooded mask aside and looked down at his enemy to find the figure's face now exposed and in perfect focus.

Harry was looking straight into the eyes of Peter Pettigrew.

A dry-heave racked his body as Harry stumbled back, feeling revolted by the sight of the man. Pettigrew stared back with wide-eyes, swallowing dryly as he quickly examined the pub, his rat-like face straining as he struggled to regain his breath.

"You," Harry finally mustered, shocked at the venom he had stocked behind that one word. Pettigrew didn't say anything only continued staring right back at him, with a gaze that was mingled with both fear and agitation.

"Harry look out!" Hermione and Ron had just dashed into the pub.

"Reductus!" the rat-faced man cried out before Harry could comprehend Hermione's warning, taking careful aim at her and Ron.

Both of them cried out as they crashed into the bar, Ron toppling over the counter before disappearing behind it. Harry didn't even register that he didn't have his own wand when Pettigrew faced him, wand pointed directly between Harry's eyes.

"I should of let Padfoot and Moony kill you," Harry spat more angry than afraid. Pettigrew only paused to reach back and strike him across the face with the silver hand Voldemort had created for his servant in return for his sacrifice. As the cold metal made contact with Harry's skin, his scar blazed with a far more immobilizing sting causing him to stumble back and wince.

"Just give up," Pettigrew said his voice a cowardly whine.

Harry didn't answer; instead he grunted and lashed out violently, successfully knocking Pettigrew's hand away. The coward's wand clattered across the room and came to rest under a solitary, broken barstool set up in the middle of the room. Harry raced towards the fallen wand, but Pettigrew caught hold of his ankle, sending him crashing to the ground.

Blinking stars out of his eyes, Harry found himself pinned to the ground by Pettigrew, the disgusting face of the man who betrayed his parents just inches above him.

"I'm sorry," Pettigrew muttered, his voice quavering. As he shifted, the light caught the glint of a dagger he had swiftly drawn and was now holding in his silver hand. Harry's eyes widened as he struggled in vain. He was going to die the worst death imaginable—he wasn't even going to get a chance to face off with Voldemort. Suddenly choking on his own breath, all Harry could think about was not wanting to die by the hands of the man whom he had saved in a moment of righteousness. He couldn't die this way—he just couldn't.

The blade came down and a burning sensation immediately blazed across Harry's scar. He closed his eyes against the pain and the glint of the silver hand and dagger waiting for blade to sink into his chest. A second later he'd be dead.

The moment's past and he wasn't. Harry opened his eyes to find Wormtail's face twisted in effort above him. Saliva was hanging from his lips and he seemed to be throwing his entire weight into the blade poised above Harry's heart. Harry could faintly feel a prick from the point of the dagger, but it was as if his chest was made of lead. No matter how much weight Pettigrew threw into the blade, it would not sink into Harry's flesh. Their eyes met and they both knew—wizard's debt. Pettigrew could not kill Harry.

"Mobilius!"

A chair came zooming in from the bar crashing over Pettigrew's head, and shortly after Ron had thrown his body into Pettigrew, knocking him off Harry.

“Accio dagger!” Hermione cried out, whipping Wormtail’s blade magically away. As soon as it was in her hands, she threw it aside and helped Harry up, the look of utter amazement, fear, and relief making it clear she had seen the strange occurrence. Hermione didn’t waste any time with words however as she and Harry raced towards Ron and Pettigrew now grappling near the solitary, broken barstool. Suddenly, Pettigrew threw his elbow up into Ron’s chin, buying himself enough time to reach for his wand beneath the misfit stool. As he succeeded in wrapping his hand around it, Harry reached forward violently struggling to pull the wand from his grips. Pettigrew thrashed and reached forward with his other arm, stretching his plump body towards the broken stool, his fingers finally clutching it.

Ron still dazed by the blow fell into the stool, his arm linking around the only undamaged rung. Hermione grabbed hold of it in attempts to untangle her friend as Harry tried to throw his weight on Pettigrew successfully sending the stool crashing down on himself. Before the tangle could be resolved however, a very familiar tug just behind Harry’s navel pulled him into a whirl of color and wind.

With a crack, they landed on a grassy knoll, the broken barstool splintering beneath them. Harry found that he could barely catch his breath as his vision slid in and out of focus. He could hardly make out Pettigrew untangling himself from them and rushing away as he struggled to sit up.

Gasping, Harry turned to find Ron and Hermione sprawled beside him along with the remains of what apparently was a portkey Pettigrew was trying to get to. Where it had taken them, however Harry had no idea.

“What were you thinking?” Hermione panted, glaring at Harry as she wiped blood from a cut on her lip. “Throwing yourself at an armed Death Eater?!”

“Pettigrew couldn’t kill me,” Harry muttered.

“Wizard’s debt,” Ron grunted sitting up.

“You two okay?” Harry asked becoming aware of the great risk his friends had put themselves in.

“Bloody grand,” Ron replied bluntly.

All three of them stood up stiffly, taking in their surroundings. In the distance, craggy mountains capped with blindly white snow twinkled in the midday sun. Around them was a forest, cheery and bright, and just several yards away, was a castle—a looming fortress beyond anything King Arthur’s tale described.

It was incredibly large and medieval, a relic of the past and the very epitome of antiquity. The black stone workings were nestled into a rocky foothill, and the castle looked only accessible by the decrepit bridge strung across a massive gorge that led to its entrance.

“What do we do now?” Hermione asked quietly.

“What else is there to do?” Harry returned as he led the way towards the castle.

After spending an atrociously long time convincing Ron to cross the bridge (which swayed unpleasantly in the summer breeze), they entered through the fortress gates. Within the courtyard, was the main entrance and they pressed forward to find themselves in front of the castle’s decaying front doors.

“This place looks like it’s been deserted since Merlin,” Ron noted nervously.

“This isn’t right,” Hermione whispered. Harry didn’t answer. Instead he wrapped his hands around the large, brass ring attached to the door and pulled. Light spilled in from the opening onto an entrance hall that must have been grand in its day. It was dimly lit by natural light spilling in from the few tiny gothic windows. There were two staircases that lead to upper floors on either side of the hall, and beyond them was another corridor, so dimly lit, it was impossible to make out any of its details from where they stood.

“Maybe it’ll give us a clue as to where we are,” Harry said, stepping into the hall hearing the end of his sentence reverberating throughout the room. “Or why Wormtail’s portkey was set for here.”

They walked in slowly, Ron, Harry, and Hermione very aware of every sound that muddled the air like the echoes of all the years the castle must have bared witness to. Harry led the way towards the dark corridor, nearly slipping several times on the age-smoothed flagstone. Hogwarts was dwarfed considerably in both age and size by this structure.

"It's really dark," Ron said in a voice higher than normal as they stepped foot into the dimly-lit corridor just beyond the two staircases. The only light came in sporadic streams from tiny, round stained-glass windows that lined either side of the hall.

"D'you hear that?" Harry asked pausing. He held his breath, thinking that he heard something like the swish of a blade. It was utterly silent as it seemed Ron and Hermione were holding their breath as well. Nerves on end, they pressed forward again. Suddenly a loud fluttering echoed throughout the hall behind them as a group of birds nesting in the rafters took flight.

Ron shrieked and clung to Hermione who pushed him off. Harry jumped, swinging his head from left to right, before relaxing a bit as he became aware of the birds that were now emptying from the entrance hall.

"Just birds," Hermione said quietly. Harry turned to look at her and Ron, breathing deeply to slow his racing heart.

"Yeah," Harry said and slowly turned around. He gasped feeling as if his body was suddenly submerged in ice water as he found there was a blade pricking into the skin of his neck. What little light was in the hall was reflecting on a long, golden sword that threatened to slice open his throat with a single flick. Harry's breath became shallow as the figure holding the sword pressed forward, forcing him to step back. A stream of colored light faintly lit up the face of the weapon-wielder.

"Not another step," Dumont said her gray eyes flickering.

## 25. Into the Belly of the Beast

Harry's body froze as he stared into the crazed eyes of Darcy Dumont. She stood half in shadow, but there was enough light to see her now ripped and soiled robes, her scratched face, and the expression of malice making up her features.

He took in a shallow breath feeling a thin line of blood trickle down his neck and seep into his collar. "Professor, please," Hermione tried in a valiant effort to try to distract the woman who held a sword to her friend's throat.

"Quiet," Dumont hissed, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose, never letting her gaze wander from Harry's face. "You're Harry Potter."

Harry didn't say anything: it was a statement not a question. He couldn't believe his luck—stumbling straight into Dumont of all people. But whether she had gotten the pendant—whether she had gotten to Jade—was unclear. There was something else—Dumont was right there in front of them—in this castle instead of in the lobby of the French Ministry with Price, Percy, and Jade. Harry could only reason two possibilities: Either Dumont had succeeded in killing Jade and retrieving the pendant and had apparated to the same spot Pettigrew had set a portkey to, or Price had used some clever ploy and escaped his crazed sister. Harry hoped against hope it was the latter.

"Now you all are going to do exactly what I tell you," Dumont said, and surprising all of them, she lowered the sword. Harry quickly stumbled back into Ron and Hermione.

"You shouldn't have followed," she said, her eyes flashing like light on the metal of Godric Gryffindor's sword she held in her hand. Then she nodded towards the front entrance.

"Let's go."

"No," Harry said not fancying the idea of exposing his back to her. "What happened to Jade?"

"And Percy?" Ron blurted heatedly though his eyes were wide with fear.

Quicker than any of them could blink, the professor swung her blade up so that it was poised just inches from Ron's chest.

"It's imperative that you move now," she said dangerously, but in spite of the curtness of her words, a bit of her more known character momentarily revealed itself—the witless woman was very much there in Dumont's face though her movements were sure and her voice was firm. She opened her mouth and added, "We haven't the time".

Hermione reached up and pulled both Ron and Harry away from the woman and began to make for the front doors from which they had entered merely a few minutes before. Hermione's breath was short, and Harry could see that it was taking much of her effort to keep herself calm. What had he gotten her and Ron into? Did he already loose one friend today? Was he going to have to watch two more be put into danger?

"Did you get the pendant?" Harry finally asked, looking cautiously over his shoulder at the woman as she herded them forward. She didn't say answer. Instead she raised her blade again making it quite clear that he shouldn't expect one.

The small trick of hope Harry had that maybe Jade, Percy, and Price where okay began to flicker with every step.

They were in the front entrance hall now where they could more clearly making out the state of Dumont who appeared to be limping and bleeding more than Harry had previously guessed.

He turned and glanced at Ron and Hermione to find his own fears mirrored in their faces. They were mere feet from the massive, rotting door from which they entered now. However, before they reached it the sounds of robes and firm footsteps impeded on their ears. Before Hermione, Harry, or Ron could fully register the sounds, the door was flung open revealing a dozen Death Eaters, cloaked, masked, and armed with wands.

Hermione gasped and pressed back, stepping on Ron's foot in the process, but he hardly noticed.

"Take them," one of the death eaters said. His masked face directed itself on Dumont as if examining her.

"The Dark Lord thanks you, Darcy," he finally said.

In response, Dumont stepped from behind Ron, Harry, and Hermione, swinging the bejeweled sword almost casually in one hand.

"Nice of him to send the welcome party," the professor said. Suddenly, Harry's blood was boiling—both he and Hogwarts, had been betrayed too many times. As the death eaters began to pour in, meeting Dumont she raised her sword, wielding it in front of her dangerously. It was then Harry realized their backs were now unguarded and one glance at Ron and Hermione told him they had realized the same thing. He nodded at them and took care to focus his attention on their surroundings.

"You were invited you know," one of the death eaters finally said to Dumont. "All in the family and that sort of mumbo jumbo."

"I'm not my parents," she replied, just as one of the cloaked members had raised their wand.

"Cruciatus!"

Dumont swung the blade up and blocked the curse from her body, sending it back to the figure that had sent it. He collapsed withering in pain.

"Get them!" a woman among the death eaters cried out.

"RUN!" Harry yelled and he, Ron, and Hermione turned and bolted towards the darkened hall.

Their hearts pumping faster than their legs, they darted through the halls, only daring to look back once or twice to see the small swarm of death eaters move towards them. Ill-aimed curses missed them, but only barely. Though they didn't stop running through the dark castle, Harry leading the way down through nearly pitch-black stairwells in hopes that there would be an escape below the structure rather than risk trapping them on the higher floors, they noticed that the Death Eaters didn't seem to be following them anymore.

"Are they trying to cut us off?" Hermione panted, lighting her wand but only to catch a quick view of the cavernous tunnel they had just slipped into before extinguishing it in case the death eaters were near.

"Dunno," Harry muttered straining his ears for sounds of angry voices and footsteps. He heard neither.

"Dumont," Ron said shakily. "Dumont—she's here. Did she apparate here? Does that mean she got...she got the guardian—and them?"

"Don't say that, Ron," Hermione whispered. "Please don't. We don't know."

"It didn't look like she was on their side up in the entrance hall," Harry said.

"Do you s'pose she's not with You-Know-Who then?" Hermione asked.

"Maybe she decided she wants the pendant for herself," Ron said bitterly. "I don't doubt she's bloody capable of taking it alone."

Harry didn't say anything—instead he pressed his hand against the cool, rocky walls: he was thinking the same thing.

They let the silence and gloom engulf them so that their ears began to hum with the absence of sound. Harry found that even as his eyes adjust to the darkness he could hardly make out the outline of his two companions.

"What do you reckon we should do?" Harry finally asked.

"Well, we can't go up without risking getting caught," Hermione said slowly. "The walls are damp down here—maybe there's water we can follow out...but I don't know which way we should go."

Though he couldn't tell for sure, he was certain Hermione and Ron were looking in all directions just as he was.

"Lumos," Hermione muttered lighting her wand again, obviously deciding that the risk of exposing them was small now that they were somewhere below the ground.

"The ground slopes a little there," Harry finally said pointing in the dim light. "I think that'll lead us down—and the walls are damper here. I think we can find a way through the cliff and into the ravine."

"Are you sure?" Hermione asked nervously.

"No."

"Well, we haven't got many choices now, do we?" Ron insisted. "Let's go."

"Now just wait a second—" But Ron had already nudged Harry on and both boys began to move forward.

"Come on, Hermione," Harry called back, seeing that she wasn't keen on following so blindly.

"We could do a mapping spell," she said. "I think I know one—"

"I don't think it's a good idea to stay in one spot with those death eaters looking for us," Ron said pointedly over his shoulder as he and Harry stepped forward into the shadowy tunnel. "You can mull over the spell as we—ARGGGGGGGGGH!"

All of a sudden, the ground seemed to have slid from beneath their feet. Harry and Ron tumbled and crashed downward a steep, rocky hill towards an unseen ground.

"Oof!"

"Harry, Ron!" Hermione hissed loudly from above, not daring to yell but the worry was still audible in her raspy voice. "Are you two okay? Hello?"

"We're okay," Harry managed to say as he struggled for breath. "Luckily, this solid rock ground broke our fall."

"That's not all it broke," Ron groaned rubbing his backside.

Above them, they could see Hermione's face peering through the large opening they had fallen through anxiously in the dim glow of her wand light. It looked as if that section had caved into the large cavern below years ago, creating the steep, sloping, edges Harry and Ron had had the pleasure of falling down.

"Are you two sure you're all right?" Hermione called down quietly.

"Fine," Harry returned, suddenly noticing that he could see Ron much more clearly down here. Feeling as if the cavern was vaguely familiar, he turned and noticed, a little way off, an opening in daylight. It looked as if a rockslide had blocked the entrance to the cave and someone had pulled away some of the rubble near the top to climb out. Bright light was filtering in, softly lighting the entire cavern.

"I think we've found our way out," Ron said. "Hermione, do you think you can slide down?"

"Sure I can," she replied hastily, "but whether I make it down dead or alive is questionable." The two boys raised their eyebrows at her and she extinguished her wand. Groaning with unease, she tried to slide slowly down the loose-rock slope only to find herself toppling out of control before making a very ungraceful landing right on top of Ron.

Struggling to maintain her dignity, Hermione quickly leapt to her feet, brushing her hair from her face.

"What are we waiting for?" she said tightly leading the way towards the exit.

They had to climb the rubble to reach the opening near the top, but the rocks were firmly held in place, and the mount was easy. Ron got to the opening first, having the longest reach, but as soon as he caught glimpse of the world outside, he retracted his body like a turtle retracts its head.

“Death eaters!” he hissed under his breath. Harry and Hermione scrambled up and peeped cautiously out. Sure enough, a group of a dozen or more of the Dark Lord’s followers was gathered within hearing distance.

“The children went towards the back of the castle,” said one of the masked servants. “The Lord wants that Harry Potter alive—you may kill his companions.”

Harry’s heart flipped as he pulled Ron and Hermione back from the light.

“We’re searching the underground,” the masked man continued. “Remember—keep Potter alive. Kill the others.”

“Come on,” Harry hissed, urging Ron and Hermione to clamber quickly back down the rocks. Their feet hit ground and he pulled them towards the other end of the cavern.

“What are we going to do?” Hermione whispered her voice shaking with fear. Harry was glancing around, struggling to make out all he could in the dim light. That’s when he saw it: the grotto—a slash in the back wall of the cavern much like a leering grin. Just like the one he had seen mother slip through over and over again in his dreams.

Shaking, Harry stepped towards the smooth walls of the cave that now sparked a déjà vu so utterly powerful, he felt weak with the memory. It was all just like the dreams—his father, who had broken his leg, must have sat just there, right where he was now standing.

“Harry,” Ron said urgently. “Snap out of it!”

Harry shook his head to clear his vision, glancing back at the cave opening. There was no time for wistfulness: there would be no mercy if they were caught.

“This way,” he said hastily, running to the back end of the cave, Hermione and Ron at his heels.

“Where are we going?” Hermione asked weakly.

“Up.”

Hermione looked about ready to protest, but the sounds of rock being moved at the mouth of the cave shocked her senses into action.

Fighting for footholds, daring not to look down, they climbed the dozen feet and scrambled into the upper grotto. There was no light now and they ran blindly into the blackness, pressing their hands against the slimy walls for guidance, hoping there would be somewhere to hide if not another way out.

“Stop,” Hermione finally said panting after she nearly tripped over a smooth boulder. “Harry, why’d you freeze back there?” He and Ron turned to face her, but they only found darkness.

“This is the place from my dreams,” Harry answered shakily. “My parents were here—this is where they came for the Guardian—this is where those two death eaters died, under that rockslide we were climbing all over.”

“Creepy,” Ron muttered.

“Are you sure?” Hermione asked. “This was where it all happened? Your mum finding that pendant?”

“Yes, everything’s the same—”

“D’you hear that?” Ron interrupted, his voice tight.

“What?”

“Shhhh!”

Both Harry and Hermione stopped talking and sure enough they could faintly hear muddled voices coming from somewhere ahead. Despite the resonance of the tunnel and water-filled cavern that Harry knew who was ahead, he thought one of the voices sounded an awful lot like—

“That’s Percy!” Ron hissed. “I’d know that whimper anywhere!”

Just then, a piercing shriek filled their ears. As if they were one body, Harry, Ron, and Hermione darted forward, finding the dark lightening somewhat as they came closer to the origin of the scream. Suddenly, they found themselves on what appeared to be a beach of an underground lake, mutedly lit by green torches.

“Look!” Hermione said pointing across the water to the other side. They could just make out three people dashing into another dark tunnel situated directly across from them.

“You don’t think that’s—do you?” she asked skeptically though she probably knew the answer. Harry didn’t respond because his attention was now drawn to a hunched figure wrapped in black now propelling a gondola towards them. Harry could see that it rowed with a handicap, and it simpered like some dark, wounded animal with ever stroke. As it came nearer, the wide lamp-like eyes blinked open, and the black, oily hands were pronounced even in the darkness.

“Eck, what the hell is that thing?” Ron blurted out, disgusted. Harry didn’t answer and instead flung out an arm and pushed both Ron and Hermione back towards the tunnel they had just come from. Before they could make a run for it, however, the creature had grounded the boat.

“Tricked by human,” it snarled painfully. “No tricks from you, or no chance to live you shall get.” Now that it was only a few feet away, Harry could see that one of its arms was nearly detached from the spidery body. It reminded him of the thin strip of skin and sinew that held Nearly Headless Nick’s head to his neck.

“Tricked, tricked, tricked no more,” the gnarly creature hissed, licking at it’s wound.

“A water ghoul,” Harry and Hermione breathed at the same time. Ron looked at his friends, before returning his gaze to the thing still standing in the gondola.

“What do we do?” he muttered from the corner of his mouth.

“Run for it,” Harry returned. “It’s the same creature from my dream—Gollum.”

“We can’t,” Hermione whispered urgently. “It’s bound by riddles—if we run without answering it’s question it’ll kill us.”

“Bad humans—bad, trick Gollum,” the water ghoul said in a low, crackly tone. “Human must answer Gollum’s riddle correctly and get a wrong answer from Gollum to cross and live.”

Harry looked from Ron to Hermione, blinking the hesitation from his eyes. He didn’t know water ghouls could attack if they refused to answer—he had assumed they were like Sphinxes: they’d only attack if you tried to guess their riddle and got it wrong.

“All...all right,” Harry stuttered acutely aware that this little being had once tried to eat his mother but seeing no other way out. Behind them were probably death eaters, and before them was this sort of Russian roulette. “What’s your riddle?” he asked.

The creature hissed at them and hunkered down in the boat like a rabid dog about to pounce. Instead, it stopped nursing it’s injured arm and spoke:

“Oft must I with wave strive and with wind fight,

Together against them contend, when I depart seeking

Wave-covered earth; foreign is land to me,

I am strong for that strife if I become still;

If I fail of that, they are stronger than I.

Wish to carry away the thing I protect.

I withstand that if my tail holds out

And stout stones can hold me

Fast against them.”

"It's an anchor," Harry said before the last words left Gollum. It hissed in surprised recoiling with agitation and resentment.

"How'd you know that?" Ron asked bewildered. "I couldn't even tell it was English!"

"If you only knew how many times I've heard that riddle," Harry muttered back feeling a cold chill race up his spine: he had heard Gollum ask his mother that very riddle and had heard her answer the very answer he had just blurted out, so many times before in the comfort of his own bed.

"It's human's turn," Gollum finally managed clawing at the sides of his boat. "Give Gollum a riddle—quick, quick, no tricks—"

"Well go on," Ron nudged Harry who looked back at him with eyebrows raised.

"I don't know any," he said now a bit panicked. The two boys turned and looked expectantly at Hermione.

"Oh, no pressure, right?" she said sarcastically even though her hands were shaking. "Hold on—I think I have one."

"Quick human," Gollum hissed in a hushed pulsating breath, "quick, quick, quick."

"Hermione..." Harry said uneasily as the creature licked its chops. "He looks hungry—"

"One minute," she said her mouth working nervously. "Er...Alright, here goes—We, we all have this: It, er...it forever goes up but never comes down."

The gnarly, oily-black creature stopped hissing long enough to contemplate.

"Forever goes up," it muttered. "And never comes down—we all have age."

Hermione nodded solemnly and Gollum leaned forward so excited it seemed to have forgotten its injury.

"Gollum knows a small word of letters only three. But if Gollum adds one letter to it, none there will be."

Harry, Hermione, and Ron just stared at Gollum fumbling motionlessly through the quiet for the answer.

"Jump in anytime, Harry," Ron finally said in a hushed tone.

"I don't know the answer!" he hissed back in surprise.

"You knew the last one!"

"Will you two shut up?" Hermione commanded looking down with a hand pressed to her chin. "Three letter words...think of three letter words..."

"Add one letter and there will be none," Harry added. "It's a three letter word..."

"Be quick, Human must," Gollum whispered hurriedly, a string of saliva thick as glue slipping from its mouth.

"One of us has got to know!" Ron exclaimed shrilly on the verge of panic as he watched the creature salivate.

"Ron!" Hermione brightened suddenly looking like she could kiss him. "You're brilliant! ONE! There will be none—the answer's one! You add an "N" and you get "none"!"

"Human is right," Gollum breathed as if the words were painful. It retreated back a little in disappointment. "Human must ask riddle again," it muttered nearly incomprehensibly

Harry and Ron, still shaken from the last riddle, looked expectantly at Hermione. She seemed to already be formulating one however, without need of their asking.

"What falls," Hermione said swallowing the tremor in her voice and taking charge, "but never breaks and breaks but never falls?"

"Night," Gollum answered frighteningly fast. Hermione could only nod, shocked by the fierceness in the creature's voice.

"Gollum's turn!" it squealed excitedly. Hermione looked up at Ron and Harry apologetically. All they could do now was hear the creature's riddle.

"Two men fall from the sky into a desert," it said, glee evident even in its raspy tone. "One is dead. What is in the dead man's pack?"

"A parachute," Harry answered just as quickly unable to hide a small triumphant and relieved smile. It was the very riddle that had bought his mother a trip across the lake.

"You're turn," he said.

Gollum's figure twitched and suddenly it screeched something loud and achingly horrible—the sound reverberated around them, driving into their ears.

"Human is right!" it yelled in anguish. "Ask Gollum! HURRY! ASK!" And with that it scrambled from the hold of the gondola, leaping onto the shore snatching at them, screaming in agony.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione pressed back, flinging their arms over their faces though the creature never touched them. It circled around them instead, and eventually they managed to maneuver a full 180 degrees around so that their backs faced the lake, and Gollum faced them, shrieking at them with wide, pale eyes.

"It can't hurt us!" Hermione yelled over its screams though she hardly sounded convinced. "It's bound by magic—it can only hurt us if we loose!"

"Ask it a damn riddle then!" Ron cried out hastily.

"I—I haven't any more!"

"Don't say that!" Harry said urgently as he pressed along side them nearer to the lake. The water lapped at their shoes, dampening their socks unpleasantly.

"Ask Gollum," the water ghoul hissed pitifully, so close to them now that it's rank breath warmed their skin. Its face was contorting in such distress and its eyes twitched with so much tension Harry feared, bound by magic or not, the creature would make lunch out of them quicker than they could jump into the lake and get wet. But it didn't. Instead it moaned pitifully, "please...."

"I've got your riddle," Hermione said bravely. "What would happen if one were to stand twenty paces back?" She looked straight at Gollum, refusing to let her gaze wander from their target. The creature's spindly body relaxed. It was now calmed by the question, sighing as it slipped into contemplation.

"One would be..." Gollum muttered. "Twenty paces, human said? What would happen?"

"That's right," Hermione said calmly. "What would happen?" Gollum hunkered down on the stone shore, momentarily letting his eyes drift from them. It was then, Harry noticed, that Hermione had drawn her wand stealthily and was holding it at her side.

"Twenty paces back?" Gollum asked, and Harry knew that it was confused.

"Yes," Hermione said. The creature moaned in frustration, but continued to rub its good hand under its chin in consideration while its injured arm lay like a broken piece of puppetry at its side.

"Perhaps," Hermione broke in. "If you tried standing twenty paces back—you could get a feel for the riddle."

Gollum momentarily quieted, looking up suspiciously at her. Hermione kept her face blank, shrugging as if to say it were merely an innocent suggestion.

"Yes," it muttered finally, allowing its hungry gaze to settle on her. "Yes, twenty paces." As it turned and counted out twenty paces, Hermione looked at Ron and Harry at last, motioning them to be prepared to push off in the boat. They nodded to show they understood, watching her as her hand clenched tightly around her wand, pressing their own hands to the bow of the gondola.

“Twenty paces,” Gollum announced and turned to face them.

“LUMOS SOLEM!” Hermione cried out, her wand aimed straight for the creature’s lamp-like eyes. It shrieked in agony as a burst of light engulfed the cave and lake, burning into Harry’s own eyes as he threw his weight against the gondola; but he knew it was nothing like what Gollum must have been feeling. He realized Hermione’s cleverness: after so long in the dark, Gollum could not stand such light.

“Hermione, get in!” Ron cried out from beside him, helping Harry push the boat off the shore. Hermione clambered in as soon as it stopped scratching the rocky bottom of the water. Immediately, she had the oar in hand, struggling to help the boys get the boat out into the lake as Gollum withered with hands over his face on shore.

“TRICKED, TRICKED!” it cried over and over again. “DIE, DIE, DIE!!!”

Harry had to struggle to not look back as the creature wailed. Instead, he concentrated on pushing against the lake bottom and forcing the boat forward. When the water was waist deep, he pulled himself into the gondola beside Hermione.

“Ron, get in,” he said hurriedly, turning to give him a hand. Ron reached forward, one hand grasping the side of the boat, the other reaching for Harry’s. However, in their haste, they had failed to notice the anguished cries of the pitiful Gollum had ceased.

Just as Ron grabbed Harry’s hand, the spindly, black creature burst from the water and was upon him.

“AHHHH!” Ron cried out, his eyes wide with fear as Gollum struggled to pull him away from the boat with such force, it nearly capsized it. Harry struggled to pull Ron in, but it was in vain as his friend’s fingers slipped from his.

“RON!” Hermione screamed trying to use the oar to beat at the creature.

“HELP!”

Ron was fighting tooth and nail, coughing and choking as Gollum tried to force him under. The creature’s frail little, oily-black body was a deceiving façade.

“GET OFF HIM!” Harry cried out. Ignoring Hermione’s protest, he plunged over the side of the gondola into the inky water. He quickly surfaced, feeling his glasses falling askew and shaking the hair from his eyes.

Pushing against the floor of the lake, Harry launched himself towards Gollum and looped his arm around the creature’s decrepit waist, fighting to pull it away from Ron.

“TRICK, TRICK, TRICK!!!” Gollum was screaming. “GOLLUM WILL EAT!!!”

Ron’s flailing was growing weaker now, and Harry could hardly get the iron grip of those spider-like hands loose. Harry’s fist rained down on the creature’s head and back violently, but nothing would make it let go.

It fought back and surprised Harry by propelling itself backwards, with him still holding on to its waist from behind. Harry was slammed into the side of the boat. From inside it, Hermione gasped, trying in vain to both keep her balance and fend off Gollum.

Blinking stars from his eyes, Harry’s grip loosened and Gollum forcefully slipped downward, pulling Ron with him.

“NO!” Harry yelled angrily and plunged into the dark water. It was no deeper than his chest, but the darkness made the depth seem infinite.

His fingers stretched out in all directions, searching for that familiar shock of red hair.

Please, he thought, begging with whomever decided the fate of the universe, please.

With one final sweep of his arm, Harry found another and grabbed hold. Suddenly, the lamp-like eyes of Gollum blinked open, revealing its position right in front of Harry. Shocked by the sudden appearance, he had to refrain from crying out and choking in the water. Harry wrapped an arm around Ron's waist and struggled to pull him from the creature's grasp even as his own brain began to dim from the lack of oxygen. He pushed off from the ground, lashed out violently, but still the creature held tight.

Barely able to think, only able to make out its glowing eyes, Harry reached forward and plunged a finger into one of them. The creature's shrieks were only amplified in the water and it sunk back, but still it held on. It wasn't until a brilliant, and well-aimed flash cracked between Harry and Ron and Gollum did it finally let go.

Free at last, Harry pushed upward with his feet, feeling his face break the surface. Hermione stood above him, features set and wand drawn, looking strangely dangerous.

"Ron," she said shocked by the sight. Her strained face melted into something filled with worry. Quickly collecting herself, she reached out to help Harry hoist Ron's limp body out of the water and into the boat. The disrupted surface of the lake revealed a spindly, black arm now completely detached, floating away from the ebb created by their movement.

With difficulty, Hermione and Harry managed to pull their friend's lanky form into the gondola. Harry, still heaving, clumsily took the oar in his wet hands and pushed them to the other side in record time.

"Oh god," Hermione said painfully as they grounded within seconds on the opposite shore. "He's not breathing."

"Do something, Hermione," Harry demanded, jumping out and looking anxiously back at her. "You've got to know some spell or something. Bring him back, I know you can!"

"There isn't a spell for this!" she cried out angrily. "Help me get him out!"

They pulled Ron out and laid him on the shore. There were tears already brimming in Hermione's eyes, but she brushed them away.

"I need you to help," she said firmly, grabbing Harry's hands and showing him how to pump them forcefully on Ron's chest. "We've got to try to resuscitate him." And without hesitation, she tilted back Ron's familiar face, now pale and starting to blue, and sealed her lips around his.

Harry didn't realize how cold the water was until now...it worsened as he continued to pump Ron's chest and watch Hermione blow air into his lungs—the wet chill leaked into him so that Harry felt as if he'd never be warm again.

"Hermione," he begged quietly. "Please."

She didn't answer. Instead she continued her duty so rhythmically one could mistake it for a pulse. Seconds passed like days as they continued in silence, but all their work and hopes seemed futile.

"Damn it!" Hermione cried out angrily, making Harry jump. He had never heard her utter so much as a curse word nor had he felt such vehemence and fury radiate from her being. Without warning, she began to pound her fist heatedly on Ron's chest so that Harry had to grab her hands to prevent her from cracking Ron's ribs.

"Hermione, don't!" Harry said, his voice cracking with shock. She didn't struggle, but it was clear she wasn't listening to him.

"Ronald Weasley!" Hermione yelled in her most authoritative tone. "If you die, I swear on my Prefect's badge, that neither I nor Harry will EVER speak to you again!!!"

And with that, she broke free of Harry's grip and slammed her fist once more onto Ron's chest.

Suddenly, Ron coughed and a stream of water burst from his pale lips.

Harry thought his chest would burst from relief. He and Hermione helped Ron to sit up and watched as their friend retched and coughed up what seemed like gallons upon gallons of water from his body. He went on for some time, as Hermione and Harry sat on either side of him until at last, the convulsions stopped.

Shaking slightly, one hand now pressed against his chest, Ron looked up with watery eyes at them. He licked his lips and color began to gather in them again, looking as if he wanted to say something.

“Why,” he managed hoarsely. “Why...”

“What is it?” Hermione asked gently.

“Why in the hell did you friggin’ hit me so hard?” Ron blurted out, wincing as he rubbed his chest. Hermione pressed her lips together and with a little cry, flung her arms around Ron’s neck who looked startled at such a show of affection.

A small smile was creeping onto Harry’s lip. Slowly, laughter began to pour from him as if he had only just remembered how. It was contagious and soon they were all laughing—laughing at the strange morose joke fate had played on them.

“Thanks Harry,” Ron said a bit difficultly as the laughter died down and Hermione pulled away. He then turned his attention to Hermione who was now avoiding his gaze, brushing yet more tears from her eyes. Ron reached out towards her, blushing visibly even in the dim light, and awkwardly squeezed her hand.

“Thanks Hermione.”

\* \* \*

They waited a few minutes for Ron’s strength to return, taking care to keep watch for Gollum. Luckily, in the time they sat on the shore on the other side, they were not disrupted. The well-aimed severing charm from Hermione had fully taken off Gollum’s already injured arm. After that last insult and previous tricks, it seemed the water ghoul was either too hurt to bother with them or found so much distaste in their presence, it preferred to hideaway and go hungry again.

Anxious once more, Harry led them into the tunnel they had watched three people flee through, situated just behind them on this side of the lake. They walked with deliberate steps, none of them wanting to betray their growing qualms about what lay ahead or the event they were leaving behind by speaking.

Harry, in particular, felt worse about going any further—at least with Ron and Hermione in toe. He felt that he had to go forth—that it was part of his duty to be in danger, but to knowingly put his two best friends in that position? His stomach plummeted with the thought.

Watching Ron nearly drown not minutes before revealed the reality of mortality and it struck a jarring cord in Harry’s heart. He stole glances at his two friends and realized that he wasn’t sure if he could face off again with something as threatening as Voldemort again without their support, but if it came to that—Harry couldn’t even finish the thought. He would rather die than loose his companions—his worst fear after all wasn’t death, it was to be the last man standing.

He looked at Ron and Hermione from time to time as they walked the short distance, wondering if there would be a way he could leave them—somewhere safe. He even considered asking them to stay put while he went on.

“Don’t even think about it,” Hermione said flatly reading Harry’s thoughts with such accuracy, he shivered. “You can’t get rid of us—we came this far with you, didn’t we?” Harry couldn’t help smiling.

“Yeah,” he said. “I guess you did.”

But before Harry had time to grow less agitated, the sounds of tremendous thumping and grappling could be heard, like that of stone being scrapped on stone. Warm, flickering light from blazing torches bled into the tunnel, lighting up their faces. Around the last bend, they're vision revealed to them another chamber with a stone bed in the middle. There was no other entry or exit way, and standing in front of the far wall was a headless creature, made of rock. It was massive, bulky, and was the exact monster Harry's own mother had beheaded.

Harry put a finger to his lips and pushed Ron and Hermione back around the bend. Cautiously, they peeked around it.

The creature's head was leaning against one side of the room, and it's body was busy trying to pry something out of the wall opposite Harry, Ron, and Hermione. It shifted, and Harry could make out a gleaming gold sword. At first he thought it was Dumbledore's sword, but he found that it was too simplistic in design and lacked too much ornamentation to be Gryffindor's blade.

With a final yank, the sword came loose from the rock, and the fumbling creature stumble back, spraying the chamber with pebbles. Harry shifted to get a better look, but as he did, his foot kicked a small stone. The tiny sound seemed infinitely magnified.

The headless creature dropped the sword with a clatter and whipped around, his shoulders shifting as if sniffing for them. Harry was holding his breath and beside him, Hermione was gripping his arm painfully while Ron watched with set jaw. The creature fumbled towards its head and picked it up. Lifting it in its shovel-like hands, it swept it over the chamber, edging towards the darkened corners. The rock monster creep forward; it was clumsy but Harry didn't doubt that it was quite competent in destroying them with a single blow.

It was heading towards the tunnel entrance now, holding its head out in front of its chest. Harry pressed himself against the bend beside his two companions, holding his breath. The creature was only one step away—then nearly right next to them. It was just standing there as if waiting for them to reveal themselves. They waited for uncounted minutes for it to leave. At long last, it began to slowly turn away and Harry quietly let out his breath. Just then, Ron let out a soft cough—the remnants from his time in the water. The rock creature stopped in front of the bend again, and from behind it, Ron was staring at his friends with wide eyes, hands clasped over his mouth.

It didn't move. Harry, breathing quickly turned his face towards the tunnel just when the creature thrust its own detached head at them. It let out a ferocious snarl so near them that Harry thought his ears would burst. The creature reared back and slammed its fist into the wall sending debris everywhere.

Falling to the ground to avoid the spray of rocks, Harry saw the massive legs as it began to step around the bend towards them. He grabbed Ron and Hermione's sleeves and ran from their hiding place, plunging past the monster between its legs.

They fell against the stone bed, watching the rock creature fumble dangerously around for them, waving its head in attempts to find them.

"Get the sword, slide it into that slot!" Harry yelled at Hermione, pointing at the far wall where a black mark and a single jade stone decorated the surface.

"What?!" she cried out bewilderedly.

"Just do it!" and he pushed her out of the way as the creature turned and slammed its fist into the very spot she had just been sitting.

"Watch out!" Ron cried out and Harry leaped onto the stone bed just as the creature tried launching itself at him.

"Get him away from Hermione!" Harry yelled back as Ron ducked a spray of rocks and dust from the creature.

"Oy!" Ron hollered, his voice still raw from his past ordeal. He stumbled towards the tunnel as Harry jumped up and snatched a torch from the chamber wall.

“Over here!” Harry yelled swinging the torch from side to side like a sword. “Come on! Come get Lily’s son!”

“Did you get it yet, Hermione?” Ron yelled clamping his hands over his ears as the rock creature let out a deep bellow.

“It’s stuck under a boulder!” She cried out shrilly. A few feet away from them, she was struggling with both hands wrapped around the hilt of the sword, trying to tug it free from under a rock the size of a traveling trunk.

“Turn it!” Harry cried out, managing to get the creature to drop its head.

“Are you mad?! It’ll break the blade!”

“It won’t!”

Hermione rearranged her hands on the hilt so that she could turn the blade counter-clockwise. Preparing to hear the snap of metal, she gasped in surprise when the blade cut through the boulder as if it were butter. Now that the blade was vertical, she slid it easily out, making a narrow slice in the rock.

“I’ve got it!” she cried out as Harry and Ron ducked beneath the stone bed as the creature fumbled dangerously over them.

She ran to the black slot on the back wall of the chamber, marked by the jade stone. She had just slid the blade into the wall up to the hilt with its single, decorative, green stone shinning at her when Ron and Harry threw themselves over the stone bed, narrowly missing another blow from the creature. They collided into her just as a golden light engulfed them, and suddenly they fell through the wall.

The sword clattered from Hermione’s hand and half crawling, half scuttling away, she, Ron, and Harry watched as the rock creature reared up before them, ready to crush all three of them in one go, before the wall they had just fallen through slid shut.

“Are you two okay?” Harry asked breathlessly, pushing himself to his feet.

“That,” Ron stated standing too, “was weird.”

“The sword,” Hermione gasped finding that she must have dropped it on the other side of the wall.

“How did you know it’d cut through stone?”

“My mum used the same sword to decapitate Rocky back there,” Harry answered. Hermione pushed herself to her feet pressing her hand to the solid wall again.

“Where are we?” she asked turning to exam the elegant hallway carved straight from the stone they now stood in. Harry looked up and found an enchanted ceiling revealing gray and menacing looking clouds. Adorning the walls were meticulously carved portraits of past dark wizards and power-hungry lords—it was all just as his mother had seen it. Despite its beauty, there was a haunting air about the place—as if the carvings were whispering.

“I don’t like this place,” Ron said, shivering.

“Neither do I,” Hermione said, but she was staring straight ahead where a gleam of bright and pleasant light pushed through the gloom. “D’you think that’s a way out up there?”

“It’s not,” Harry answered surely. Ron and Hermione looked at him, but didn’t say anything. Instead they followed him forward, trying to ignore the disturbing eyes of the carvings’ subjects.

As they approached the square of light, they heard voices. Harry could now see that it was a room, not an exit out of the castle as Hermione had hoped. From it, they could make out voices—voices that they knew.

“Is that—” Ron started excitedly, suddenly quickening his pace. He stepped through the door first followed by Harry and Hermione.

They found themselves in an ornate room adorned by Indian cottons and Chinese silks. It was overly furnished and lavishly decorated—just as it had been in Harry's dreams. Except, instead of his mother and the jade guardian, there were three people, standing near a pedestal in the center of the space. It was Logan Price, Jade, and Percy.

"You're all alright," Harry said, letting out a breath. "We've got to get out of here, there's—"

It was then Percy turned and spotted them. His face was drawn, pale, just as it had been when he was fleeing from Dumont. It only took one look for Harry to see that something was very wrong.

"Ron, RUN!" Percy cried out in distress, making a move to hurry them away.

He hadn't made two steps before he was screaming in agony.

## 26. The Flesh of the Jade Guardian

Ron's face was stricken as he watched his brother's body hit the ground and convulse from the well-delivered Cruciatius curse. Percy's screams that filled the chamber were nearly deafening and Ron, Harry, and Hermione could only watch helplessly from a few feet away.

"No, stop!" Ron cried out as if he felt the pain too. He sprang forward, but Hermione quickly took hold of his arm, though she was nearly sickened to the point of paralysis. At last the curse stopped, and Percy's body ceased the convulsions, though a random shudder ran visibly down his lanky form, making him look much like a macob marionette.

Ron tore from Hermione and quickly stumbled the few steps to his brother, falling to his knees at his side. Percy was still shaking, breathing heavily, but his eyes were open and he was trying in vain to push himself up from the smooth, stone ground.

Harry's senses were slowly flooding back into him and his eyes drifted up from the form of the two brothers and settled on the figure of Logan Price who stood above them. His gray eyes flashed with such a passionate fury, Harry thought he could feel the heat blow across his face. Yet it was not nearly enough to warm the chill that was seeping through his damp clothes and into the very core of his bones.

Price was holding a familiar looking silver sword and had it directed on Percy—he was using it as a wand. Beside him was Jade. She was sitting with her back to them, in a silk-pillowed chair, staring at the back wall near the center pedestal, showing no sign that she was remotely aware of what was happening mere feet away.

"Get up," Price said quietly to Percy. Percy was still trying to gather enough breath to push himself from the ground and couldn't obey. Price, retaining the calm slackness in his face, re-directed the sword, pointing its tip towards the wall behind them.

"Reducto Maximus," he uttered and a blast erupted from the point of the blade, blowing a sizable chunk out of the wall.

Beside Harry, Hermione cried out, and Percy frantically scrambled up successfully with Ron's help. They staggered back and away from the still smoking wall, staring at the young man before them.

"You," Harry breathed out, his shock forced away by a growing anger.

"Me, Harry Potter," Price said.

"Why aren't you in France with Jade's parents?" Ron asked bewildered, his voice shaking with fear and resentment.

"Ron—," Percy was panting. "He betrayed the Ministry...he's part of You-Know-Who's followers..."

"Jade, get over here," Harry said as calmly as he could without letting his gaze drift from Price who's calm face was more unnerving than the blade in his hands.

Jade didn't respond to Harry's request. Instead, she sat as stiffly as before. Price looked away from Harry and gazed at the girl in the overly ornate chair beside him. He lowered his hands, and the sword dropped to his side. With one swift movement, he pulled Jade gently up from the seat and kicked it away. It clattered and came to rest near the pedestal as Jade's head vaguely followed the movement.

"Turn and face them," he said and spun her so that Jade's face was now to them. Harry's breath caught in his throat. Jade looked just as she had always looked before, except now, her features seemed dulled by blankness—as if the core of her being had dribbled from her body leaving a living, yet life-less shell. This was how a dementor's victim must look, Harry thought and the chill deepened within him.

"Jade?" Hermione asked quietly, her voice shaking. A small smile flickered across Price's face at their discomfort.

"What have you done to her?" Harry blurted out, knowing very well that they had seen the beginnings of this coreless puppet within Jade days before this.

“Nothing,” he replied. “She’s merely revealed her true identity, that’s all.” Harry swallowed hard, knowing where this was all going.

“What are you going to do with her?”

“Present her to my lord, of course,” Price answered matter-of-factly.

“But why?” Hermione ventured quietly. “She’s nothing to you or You-Know-Who.”

“But on the contrary, she’s very much something to the Dark Lord,” he answered stepping forward and pushing Jade alongside him. “And to me...in fact, I would bet she’s something to Mr. Potter too, am I right?”

All eyes fell on Harry and he turned to look at each face before swallowing loudly. It was true—Harry had felt the strange connection to Jade ever since before she stumbled from the forbidden forest. However, there was something else that had accompanied the feeling of connection, but Harry had forced the qualm into the very back of his mind until the passing time and growing friendship made him forget all together.

“She’s not dangerous to anyone,” Harry said unable to hide the waver in his tone. Price smiled, spreading the malice across his features like his lips spread across his face.

“Not even to your parents?”

Harry was startled into silence.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Harry finally managed, angry that this man, who was now revealed to be their foe, had spoken of his, Harry Potter’s, parents.

Price leaned forward a bit and lowered his voice so that they had to strain to hear him.

“Yes, you do,” he said. “Just think about it—don’t fight reality with ignorance, Harry—you’ve even seen it in your dreams—”

“How d’you know about my dreams?” Harry asked.

“Darcy Dumont,” Price answered looking a little miffed at the subject change. “She made quite an informer for You-Know-Who during her time as one of your Hogwarts staff.”

Harry could feel his cheeks burn with anger at the thought of further betrayal—Voldemort’s filthy influence had penetrated even Hogwarts in the form of Dumont, and he managed it even though he had yet to reach his optimal power.

“Your sister,” Ron said in shock. It was the first time Price seemed remotely startled.

“You knew?” he asked.

“We found out,” Harry returned sharply. Price gave the three a calculating stare before letting his cold gaze fall back on Jade.

“Darcy was how I kept tabs on Jade, as Dumbledore more than competently shrouded her in secrecy,” Price explained. “She kept me informed on the growing evidence that Jade was indeed who I, Darcy, and even Dumbledore thought she was. At first, it seemed that my presumptions were wrong—after all, she was thinking for her self, made friends, she was composed of flesh for god’s sake—she had a family. But when I came to Hogwarts that night a few weeks ago to share information from the Ministry with Dumbledore in attempts to build a friendly relationship, I saw what she did to you, Mr. Potter. Darcy was certain, more so after that event, that Jade would reveal herself.”

“Jade didn’t do anything to me,” Harry snapped his voice raising, though deep down he was still fighting with himself about whether or not he believed that was true.

“She did,” Price insisted. “You look like you don’t believe me, Harry, but I know you do. Look at the girl, and remember what you saw in your dreams—remember the pain that she caused you that night. She’s the bloody reason your parents died.”

Harry was speechless—he turned to look at Jade and found that he was contemplating what life would be like had his mother destroyed that unornamented jade pendant—if it was never found. Would his parents be alive? Would he be a completely different person? But Harry didn’t have that choice even if he knew the outcome. He blinked and for a millisecond the world was black and when his eyelids finally opened, he saw a bit of familiarity in Jade’s blank features—she didn’t have a choice either.

“You’re not saying that Jade—Jade is,” Hermione was uttering in disbelief. “She can’t be—”

“She is,” Price insisted placing a hand on Jade’s shoulder. “She is the Jade Guardian.”

“But how can she *be* the Guardian?” Hermione persisted. “The Guardian is a pendant—”

“The Jade Guardian is also a manifested form,” Price stated firmly. “And that form resides right there in front of you.” Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Percy looked straight at Jade who stared at a point somewhere beyond them.

“It’s a myth,” Hermione breathed.

“That’s what you’d like to believe,” Price said quietly, picking up the jade piece around Jade’s neck. “But this vessel of power—she is real and nearly 1500 years old.”

“She looks good,” Ron said bluntly. Price’s eyes flashed and Ron quieted. He dropped the pendant and turned to face them.

“Jade is the Guardian,” he said, “and she remembers.”

“Remembers what?” Harry demanded. The young man smiled sardonically, flipping the sword around his one hand, while taking Jade’s chin in the other.

“Do you remember your past?” he asked her softly.

“No,” she answered expressionlessly. “I remember my creation.”

Harry shook his head, both startled and frightened by her words. No one knew the details of the Jade Guardian’s origins—if they knew of the vessel of power at all.

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked hesitantly. Jade didn’t even look at them when she began to answer indifferently.

“It started between the time of King Arthur and the Dark Ages, when Europe was hardly Europe, and history could not discern between fact and myth.”

“You’ve done something to her,” Harry said hotly.

“I haven’t,” Price replied easily. “She just knows.”

“There was a dark wizard, Lord Medraut,” Jade continued, making no acknowledgement of Harry and Price’s exchange. “In his youth, he had fought side by side with King Arthur himself, but as Medraut’s abilities grew, he turned away from the king in his thirst for power and domination.”

“During Lord Medraut’s zenith, he had control over as much as half the wizarding populations—Not even Merlin could defeat him alone. Medraut was not only skilled in the arts of dark sorcery, but also in war and control. He had no desire for any human love, or things of beauty—he only lusted after power.”

“After every take-over, Medraut would return to his favorite residence—a massive castle nestled in the French Alps. His thirst for bloodshed did not cease during his war-hiatus—he exercised his cunning and cold-heartedness by taking over muggle villages around his home. He had a special enjoyment in destroying muggles for he felt that they were ignorant and hardly worth a battle.”

“On one such outing, he came to a village during a witch burning. All the villagers were gathered in the square when he and his army came charging through. There, he massacred nearly everyone—women, children, and the elderly--and showed no mercy just as he had done many times before. However, when he reached the center of the square, all that would change. There, tied to a stake set for burning, was a woman with dark hair. Around her neck was a pendant of curious, green stone and at her feet was a child no more than a year old.”

“He rode up to her, sword arched above his head, preparing to deliver the fatal blow, but the moment she looked up at him, he found that he could not deal it. He had killed witches and wizards before—but never had he looked upon a face so unmarked by fear in his presence that in that moment he thought he might have found an equal.”

“The woman was brought back with him to his castle where they were wed several weeks later. Suddenly, Medraut’s activity slowed and more and more of his providences were being released or taken over by other competing dark wizards. For a handful of blissful months, Medraut reveled in the miracle of human affection and his stony heart began to change.”

“However, his pride would bring an end to it all. As time went on, Medraut lost control of his empire—and his respect. He became a laughing stock to all other wizarding lords, dark and light. They all said that he had given up his power to a woman. The final straw came when one young wizard launched an attack on Medraut’s personal providence near the French Alps. Medraut, in his fury, massacred the arrogant youth and his army. That same night, Medraut, his pride bruised, blamed his wife and murdered her.”

“He commanded two of his groundskeepers to bury her before he went to make his announcement—He, who had killed his only love, was the most heartless and powerful dark wizard in existence. The groundskeepers buried the woman’s body the next night in the front courtyard as Lord Medraut watched from a balcony. Her child was asleep in a cradle near him for try as he might, he could not bring himself to rid himself of the thing.”

“Just as the groundskeepers lowered the body, Medraut was taken with guilt—a suffering he had never known before even when his hands were wet with blood. Without thinking, he apparated to the gravesite, startling his groundskeepers. He jumped into the hole and hugged the cold body of his love against his chest where his cold heart resided in torment. He commanded his servants away and sat in the grave for hours. As dawn broke, he took the strange pendant from the woman’s neck and buried her.”

“Medraut, in attempts to deaden his hurt, vowed to care for the woman’s child as his own. He gave the woman’s daughter her pendant and shared often the story of how her mother had come about getting such a peculiar stone as the girl grew. Her mother, an adventurous witch, had chartered passages with the wizards of Norse, and so found herself in a Far East land during one of her travels. There she met an elderly sage, who presented her a smooth, green, rectangular stone—a green mineral called jade. The sage explained that its translucent quality and hardness embodied the spirit of nobleness, strength, innocence, and all that is sublime. Touched by the gift, the girl’s mother had it put on a chain and used it as her vessel for magic.”

“Medraut raised the girl within the seclusion of the castle walls. She was to talk to no one but him. He imported all the beauties of the world for her—silks from India and artful depictions from French monasteries. He gave her a lavish life isolated from all human contact, where he educated her in all the arts of war and magic. The girl showed talent particularly with dark sorcery and alchemy.”

“As Medraut watched her grow, he dreamed of her becoming his heir and continuing his long and frightful reign. But the girl turned out to be much like her mother—adventurous and thirsty for the outside world. When she was nearly sixteen, she managed to escape the castle through an underground exit she had found. She wandered into the small village that was within her father’s rule and there met a stable boy, whom she began to visit on a daily basis. The boy was passionate and brave, often sharing thoughts about overthrowing her father.”

“At first she was appalled by such ideas and nearly warned Medraut about them—but she was compelled by the boy as they became fast friends. He showed her the horrors Medraut had inflicted upon both the wizarding and non-magic world and even recalled the day the Lord murdered the girl’s mother. The girl grew a hate towards the man she regarded as her father thenceforth. She soon began her own brand of espionage within the castle and told the stable boy Medraut’s plans for taking King Arthur’s lands, and the boy began his own plans for a village uprising. She soon became involved in a plot to kill Lord Medraut and volunteered to poison him by tainting his drink.”

“One morning, Medraut was coming back from another village terrorizing, even more satisfied than usual for he had gotten word that King Arthur was dead. As he came near the castle, he saw the girl he had raised as his own racing towards the stable boy’s village. Angry at her disobedience, he followed her on foot. There he stumbled on her and the stable boy and their plans for his murder.”

“In a fury that would rival all the fire in hell, he revealed himself and murdered the stable boy as the girl begged for him to stop. He didn’t hear her—all he wanted to do was kill the boy. After he had mutilated the stable boy’s body, he displayed it out in the village square where the people cowered at the sight. The girl, crying as if her life had ended without her, was dragged back to the castle, where she was locked in her underground chambers.”

“It was weeks before Medraut felt remorsefully enough to let her out. A new silk parcel in hand, he descended into the dungeons to release his daughter. When he had at last unlocked the door and stepped into her chambers, he found she had hung herself.”

“It was then his stone heart died. Whatever soul he had was extinguished. He had no heir now—and was alone and jaded. Emblazoned with rage, he stole to his studies and procured a spell for binding someone’s essence to an object. He wanted his power to inflict the world for as long as the desire for power and domination existed—and he wanted to punish the girl for releasing herself from him. The spell would capture her soul, her essence, as he could not bind her to him in life, and strip her of all free will. She would be a mere half-life, a witness to the destruction he dreamed he would create. However, the spell for such a Dark Existence that could capture his power, would also take his life.”

“At this point, Medraut didn’t care. He was through with life. And so he bound his power to the essence of his lover’s child, and thinking it a cruel irony, bound his dark magic and the girl’s spirit to the Jade Pendant—for jade was the symbol of innocence, strength, and all that is sublime—this piece of jade would be the heart of much devastation.”

“And with his dying breath, he sent word to his rivals that the pendant would belong to anyone who could get to it, and hid it within the girl’s chamber under his castle.”

“Eventually, several Dark wizards got to it—some say it was the Manifested power that killed Merlin. In retaliation, Godric Gryffindor, Helga Hufflepuff, Salazar Slytherin, and Rowena Ravenclaw joined forces with other powerful light wizards to take control of the Jade Guardian. They discovered when a dark wizard lost possession of the Guardian, it would reappear within its chambers for another power-monger to procure. They helped put down many of the empires created by these new dark lords who possessed the Jade Guardian, but not before many lives were lost, and many dwellings destroyed. Eventually in the chaos of the Dark Age’s end—most lost track of the Guardian—forgetting Medraut’s castle existed—forgetting about Medraut himself. The pendant returned to it’s hiding place and its records became myth, but it waited there for the next possessor.”

Percy, Ron, Hermione, and Harry were shocked into silence and they stared at Price’s nonchalant face.

“You brainwashed her, you bleedin’ fruitcake,” Ron blurted out, his hands balling into fist at his sides.

“Ron,” Percy broke in authoritatively. “That is *not* a thing to be saying to a man holding a huge sword!”

Harry's mind was reeling too much to be noticing the two brothers—he had known it in his heart, but he had chosen to be ignorant of it—as impossible as it seemed, Jade was the Guardian from his dream. The same Jade Guardian Dumbledore wanted destroyed because of the destruction it was the root of. She had couldn't remember her past because she never had one—only a creation. But how could this Guardian become flesh and bone, just as they were? Nevertheless, it was the same manifested power that his mother refused to obliterate—but Jade—Harry knew her, been her friend—she couldn't be evil or dangerous. Before he could help himself, he heard her voice from the confines of his memory, “*How can you be so sure?*” she had said. “*You don't know me, I don't even know me!*”

“She's not dangerous,” Harry muttered though he had meant the comment to be to himself. There was no other argument left—“She's not.”

The words seem to break something in Price though, shelling away the calm demeanor. Before Harry could fully register what was happening, Price was taking quick, furious strides towards him, the sword swinging like an axe at his side. Harry instinctively pressed back, but not before the young man reached him first. Price grabbed a handful of Harry's robes with one hand, and in the other, raised the blade so that it was pressed against his throat. The metal tip broke the dried blood of the cut from Dumont's sword and the trickle of blood started down Harry's collar again.

“No, let him go!”

“Get off of him, you Nutter!”

“Stop it!”

The chorus of protest from his friends and Percy were nearly blocked out by the pounding of his heart. Harry gazed up at Price whose cold eyes burned with an overwhelming heat now that he was so close to him.

“She's not dangerous?” Price hissed the composure that had made up his character slipping away, revealing a fearful face. “She's”—he spat out the word while throwing his chin back to indicate Jade—“she's *not* dangerous?”

“No,” Harry said firmly. Price's eye's widened in fury and pressed Harry back against the wall.

“SHE—” he spat, his voice rising dangerously as he slammed Harry violently into the rock wall behind him at every word. “KILLED MY PARENTS!” Price pushed him back once more with so much vehemence that the force knocked Harry's head back. Harry's glasses slid off his face and fell to the ground.

Dizzy and out of breath, Harry heard a distinct crack of his glasses breaking as he tried to push away from the crazed ministry official, but to no avail. Price was breathing hard—staring at him with anger so deeply sown, Harry thought he could see the young man's rage sprout on his face.

“I want so badly to hurt you, Harry Potter,” Price said fighting to restore calm to his voice. “Even kill you—but that is not my privilege.” He released him and Harry nearly slid to the floor had Ron not appeared at his side to steady him.

“It wasn't the Guardian's fault really,” Price said in a steady tone, brushing his hair neatly back with a shaky hand. “It's your parents', Mr. Potter—she has to be commanded. They yielded the Guardian—they took my mother and father along with countless years of my life. Your parents used the pendant to kill them.”

And Harry saw the connection. The two Death Eaters that were crushed beneath the rubble that had fallen from the cavern roof in his dreams—beneath the same pile that he, Ron, and Hermione had climbed up on in attempts to get out of the same cavern—they were the Prices. His parents had killed Dumont and Price's parents...and their parents were the Death Eaters who betrayed both their master and their fellow wizards.

“Your parents were Death Eaters,” Harry choked, pushing away from Ron and straightening. He blinked rapidly, trying in vain to focus his vision—he struggled to make out his glasses only to find that they had been crushed on the floor in the scuffle. Slowly, he reached down to pick up their broken remains and pocketed them.

“Yes,” Price responded composed again. “They were—and as a tribute to them, I have taken up their cause. I will serve their Lord with all my being. It is the only way I can make up for all my lost years and my parents’ lost lives.”

“I trusted you,” Percy blurted out, his face splotching red.

“Not a good judge of character, are you?” Price replied simply, turning back to Jade.

He fell silent and stepped away from Harry. Harry quickly turned to face Hermione, Ron, and Percy and tried to work out a plan for escape wordlessly with them.

“The Dark Lord is currently visiting the Minister of Magic,” Price said making their heads snap towards his voice. “But don’t worry, he will soon come here—to the Guardian’s chamber to possess the pendant and the Spirit of Vengeance. And along with it, he shall have his foe. If I were you, Mr. Potter, I would be very much afraid.”

“Good thing you’re not then,” Harry breathed.

Before Price had a chance to respond, the sound of pounding footsteps silenced him. Darcy Dumont burst into the chamber, wielding two swords: she held Godric Gryffindor’s at her side, and in a leather sheath, a gold hilt adorned by a single jade piece was visible. She stepped in and only revealed her surprise at seeing Harry, Ron, and Hermione for a split second before she turned her attention to Price.

“Hello brother,” she said simply.

Harry looked back at Hermione and Ron and saw his panic reflected in their faces. What little chance they had of outwitting Price and escaping was now further lessened by the appearance of Dumont...how could they escape two more than competent wizards wielding swords?

“Darcy,” Price said and Harry was startled by the shock in his voice. “I left you in the woods.”

“And I came here,” she replied slowly raising Godric Gryffindor’s sword. “I had to get my sword back after all.”

“It isn’t yours,” Price insisted raising the silver blade in his hands that Harry now recalled to be the one Dumont had used in their Defense class months before. “I stole the thing back because *Deceptor* was left to me—it was in mother and father’s will.”

“Yes, well,” Dumont replied stepping deeper into the chamber, only letting her gray eyes drift fleetingly to Jade before settling her gaze back on her brother. “It wasn’t much use to you in that padded room at St. Mungos, was it?”

Ron and Percy’s jaw dropped. Ron turned and looked at Harry who was gawking at the twins facing each other. Dumont wasn’t the Price child that went insane—it was Logan. He had been committed, he had been the loon all this time, not the absentminded professor (A/N: I know! I just had to use it—“absentminded professor”—hahahaha...oh, sorry, continue...) Harry had become so sure was missing a few screws.

“So when did you figure it out?” Price asked Dumont. “When did you figure out that you had made a mistake?”

“When I came down to Hogsmeade during the attack of the death eaters to protect you from her,” Dumont said pointing with her sword at Jade. “And you threw a curse at me. I figured that was a dead giveaway.”

“Sorry you had to find out like that, sis,” Price said and his tone was bitter. Dumont was stepping forward again and what she said next left Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Percy in even more shock.

“It doesn’t have to be this way—you can turn away from You-Know-Who.”

All of sudden the insane blaze rose in Price's eyes again, but he was able to take control of it unlike before.

"You wouldn't understand, Darcy," he said shaking his head. He stared back at her and Harry was unnerved by the intensity in which they stared at each other.

"You spent your years in the comforts of an adopted family who cared for you, sent you to school and abroad," Price said in a strained, even tone. "But what was I doing? Suffering alone a hundred miles away in St. Mungo's. I had nothing left when mother and father died—I had gone from a naïve and talented young boy to something broken and aware of my mortality. What was there to live for in a world where Voldemort's wrath left so many dead? It wasn't until Lucius Malfoy showed up one visitation day to tell me the truth—that my parents died for a reason, for their service to this great, dark lord. And all that time—the Ministry lied to us."

"I wouldn't follow Mother and Father, even if I knew," Dumont said firmly and now her voice cracked with anger. "The ministry did what they did under Dumbledore's request to save us from further pain. Don't you think I suffered too? Knowing my only relation—my twin—had lost his mind, was alone and I couldn't help him? I threw myself into my studies because I could barely live with that—if I had to finish growing up with the knowledge that my parents were death eaters too—"

She didn't finish, but the tension that her words produced filled the expanse of the chamber. Harry was beginning to understand this woman's nature now, as it finally began to surface. His memory flooded through his mind with the bits and pieces of everything he had gathered from the dreams and parts of conversations. The Prices must have been Ministry workers—Sirius had said Harry's parents were betrayed by the two who died that night—the fact that the Prices were Death Eaters was probably kept from Dumont and Price in hopes that it would save them from further suffering. After Dumont and Price's parents died in the cavern that night Lily and James went after the pendant, Price went insane and was pulled out of school. After Dumont left Hogwarts, a family adopted her because she had no relations other than her crazed brother and dead parents—her fleeting personality was a result of her wounds. Price on the other hand, must have spent several years at St. Mungo's, before eventually returning to the world of the sane.

"It's because of Potter's parents and that *thing* our parents are dead," Price retorted, his voice slowly rising, pointing an accusing finger at Harry and acknowledging the pendant.

"But Harry Potter had nothing to do with that," Dumont insisted. "His parents were fighting for the noble cause—whereas ours were not. They had to die if the wizarding community were to stay intact, and even if it hurts, I have come to accept that."

"Our parents saw the future," Price said slowly. "And the future was with the Dark Lord."

"But it doesn't have to be," Dumont said firmly. "Come on, Logan—I may have changed my name, but we are still blood. We can destroy the Jade Guardian forever."

Harry's ability to act suddenly came rushing back to him.

"No, you can't!" he cried out breaking between them and grabbing Jade's hand. Price turned quickly, the beginnings of a curse already on his lips.

"Expelliramus!" Dumont cried out racing forward, sending the sword flying from Price's hands. Harry ducked it and pulled Jade away.

"Come on!" he yelled. She didn't budge; instead she looked at him with a blank stare.

"What are you doing?" she asked quietly in a flat, raspy tone.

"Having tea," he answered dragging her towards the others, ducking another curse from the dueling siblings. "Trying to stay alive, silly." He forced her down behind a pile of silk pillows just as Price succeeded in retrieving his fallen sword and delivered a blasting curse their way. Feathers burst everywhere as the curse glanced off course, and Harry pulled Jade up and was off again.

“Run!” he yelled as he neared Ron, Hermione, and Percy. Without replying, they turned and led the way through the door. They raced, hearts pounding, down the eerie hallway where the stone carvings stared after them. Percy leaned hard on Ron, but neither brother complained as they sped towards the end and found the stone wall they had fallen through solid and impenetrable once again.

“No,” Hermione gasped slamming her fist against the cool surface. “We need the sword to get back out!”

Suddenly, the sound of pounding feet made their heads turn. Dumont was racing towards them, her gray eyes glinting behind the oblong frames. She had both the sword with the jade emblazoned hilt and Godric Gryffindor’s in her hands. At first, Harry could have sworn that Dumont had finally gone beyond cracked and was going to spear them all in one go, but it all became clear as she raced towards them.

“Get out of the way!” she cried out and they obliged, diving out of the way as she plunged forward, swung one of the swords and sliced clear through the rock. A bright light engulfed them and Harry and the others fell through to the other side where the wall closed up once more.

Harry paused only long enough to blink the dust out of his eyes and recognize the rock creature’s chamber. He had barely pulled himself and Jade to their feet when a loud roar shook the ground beneath them.

“Look out!” Hermione cried as Ron pushed Harry and Jade from the hammering fist of the rock creature, still headless and obviously very angry.

“Get out!” Dumont cried out, ducking beneath the stone bed in the middle of the room as the creature ambled blindly towards her.

“We can’t just leave her,” Percy said looking unsurely back as they ran for the only entrance. “She can’t take care of that thing on her own!”

Just then, the Professor dove away towards the creature and sliced the jade-emblazoned sword through its legs. She scrambled up and made after them just as the rock legs broke and the creature toppled to the ground.

“I’d say otherwise,” Ron said pointedly, dragging Percy along.

“Go! Hurry!” Dumont insisted flying towards them. Harry nodded and turned to move forward before realizing Jade did not follow. Rolling his eyes, he jumped back and grabbed her hand, yanking her forcefully along.

They stumbled through the darkened passage until they reached the shore of the underground lake. The gondola was still grounded where Hermione and Harry had left it.

“No,” Ron groaned. “Not the lake again—”

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Dumont insisted.

“But what about Price?” Harry asked.

“Knocked him out good enough,” she replied hastily examining the lake. “But You-Know-Who’s set to apparate into the chamber soon—he’ll know we’ve escaped within seconds—I think one of his servants warned him.”

“Pettigrew,” Harry muttered. She looked at him curiously, before making towards the gondola, urging them to hurry and get in.

Ron sighed and helped Percy in, looking nervously out into the water.

“I’m sure Gollum’s had enough of us,” Hermione said reassuringly, reading his face. “It’s a bigger risk not to cross.” He hardly looked comforted, but nodded anyway and climbed in. Hermione and Ron helped pull Jade into the boat as Harry and Dumont pushed it off the shore—the professor still seemed set against the girl and wouldn’t touch her.

Harry clamored in just as the water reached his waist and grabbed the oar. Bracing himself against the back of the gondola, he made to propel them as fast as possible to the other side. In the short time in the boat, Hermione was trying to reach Jade with no avail.

"Jade," she said worriedly. "It's us—whatever Price told you—it's not true—don't you believe us?"  
Jade didn't answer. She only stared far off into the distance.

"Let me try," Ron said quietly, clearing his throat, "Jade—you're driving us mental! Snap out of it before I go Whomping Willow on your—!"

"Ron!" Hermione hissed furiously.

"What? Just thought the more direct approach would help."

"Could you be a little more sensitive?!"

"Quit wasting your time," Dumont said and silenced their bickering. "Price is right about one thing." Hermione cast the woman a disdainful look, just as Harry was sending the gondola forward with another stroke. They were thrown into each other as the bow collided with something in the water, stopping them completely. Harry dropped the oar as he threw his hands against the sides of the gondola to steady himself. He heard it splash as it hit the water. All unnerved, the passengers in the gondola turned to stare at him.

"Please tell me you hit a rock," Ron pleaded. He turned to look at the oar in the water beside him.

"I think so," Harry answered watching the blurry outline of his friend. Ron nodded and hesitantly reached out into the black water to retrieve the oar.

"What's this?" he said pausing over the water cautiously, he picked up the oar and dropped it in the gondola before reaching into the water again. He pulled something black and spindly from the surface.

"Oh, EW!" Ron gasped dropping the clawed arm onto the floor of the boat. Before Hermione could demand that he throw the detached arm from the water ghoul back, something shrieked an ear splitting note.

"I'm thinking that thing's a bit miffed," Percy said uneasily turning his head to get a full view of the lake.

Suddenly, a spindly, oil-black creature erupted from the water, grappling the side of the boat, upsetting the balance and nearly toppling them.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" Ron screamed pressing against Percy trying to push himself away from the edge. Harry cried out and stumbled backwards, trying to regain his balance in the rocking boat and bat the creature with the oar.

Dumont pushed Hermione and Jade away as Ron and Percy yelled in panic. Ron scrambled about, falling off his seat and hitting the floorboards.

"Get off!" Harry screamed pushing himself forward swinging the oar. It connected solidly with Gollum's head. The creature shrieked furiously, its open mouth spewing rank breath right into Ron's face.

"ARGH!" Ron cried out. His outstretched hands reached out and he snatched up the detached arm from the floor of the gondola, swinging it hard like a bat so that the hand on one end of the arm struck the creature across the face. Gollum's fingers (on his one arm) unclenched from the side of the gondola and it disappeared into the water.

"Ron, Harry!" Hermione said pushing past Dumont. "Are you two okay?"

"Fine," Harry answered, shakily picking up the oar once more. Ron was breathing heavily against Percy who looked as if he was struggling to get his heart to start up again. Ron didn't answer, but when he looked down to find the spindly arm still in his hands, he yelped and threw it overboard.

Harry propelled them to the other side as fast as his muscles could manage. He wanted to get them off the cursed water as fast as possible.

When they grounded safely on the other side, Dumont hurried them out. It took Harry, Ron, and Percy to successfully get Jade out of the gondola because she refused to cooperate—she didn’t fight back—in fact she didn’t do anything, which made moving her difficult. Harry was growing steadily impatient with her—here they were, trying to save her life and she was refusing to at least make an effort.

“Are we making for the woods?” Hermione panted as they entered the pitch-black tunnel that would lead them to the grotto and open cavern.

“Yes,” Dumont returned in a hushed tone. “We need to get out of the castle.”

They ran the rest of the way haphazardly through the gloom in silence. It was tedious going, as Harry had to stop several times to dislodge Jade from crevices she managed to lodge herself into and the like. So she was the Guardian, Harry thought as he pressed forward, dragging Jade along. As implausible as it was—Harry couldn’t shake the feeling that it all made sense. He couldn’t shake his growing qualms about her either...could she destroy them like Price insinuated? He forced the feeling down into the pit of his stomach—she had been his, Hermione’s, and Ron’s friend—she had been very much alive and good and he knew she deserved a chance.

They skidded to a stop at the mouth of the grotto. Harry was about to say something but Dumont put a finger to her lips. As they strained their ears, they could make out voices. Harry was staring at Dumont and she nodded, pointing towards the open ceiling against the cavern wall before them. Even without his glasses, Harry could make out movement: Death Eaters.

Without a word, Dumont mimed that she would levitate them down two at a time. When they were in the main cavern below—where her parents had died—they were to make for the exit.

Percy and Ron went first. Dumont pointed the sword at them, and using it as a wand, muttered a spell and gently lowered them down to the cave floor. Hermione and Jade went next. Then it was Harry and Dumont’s turn. She pointed the blade awkwardly between them and they too descended.

When Harry’s feet hit the ground, he cast a fleeting glance at the hole in the cave ceiling he, Ron, and Hermione had slipped down from. There was no denying they were right under a handful of Death Eater’s noses.

Quietly, they hurried to the entrance. Dumont clamored up the pile of rubble blocking the majority of the hole first and peered out—if she was disquieted by the fact that they stood where her parents were crushed, she didn’t show it.

She nodded and squeezed out on her stomach. They followed suit, Percy, then Jade (who had to be kind of pushed through), Hermione, Ron and lastly, Harry.

The bright sunlight was shocking and even though everything was blurred, the light hit Harry’s eyes and set them aflame. He had nearly forgotten what daylight was after their short time within the gloom of the castle’s belly. They were now in a ravine. A dozen feet about them, creaking in the gentle breeze was the very decrepit bridge Harry, Ron, and Hermione had cautiously crossed after Pettigrew.

“How do we get out?” Percy asked staring upwards.

“Levitation charm, maybe?” Dumont said more to herself than anyone else. “But I don’t like the idea of just appearing up over the edge without getting a look around.”

She led them towards the left over the rocky floor of the ravine. As luck would have it, they found the ravine sloped gently enough for them to climb up several yards from where they exited the cavern.

“Jade come on,” Harry said as they began to climb. She wouldn’t budge. Instead she stood facing the ravine wall. In the end, to get them to hurry, Dumont levitated her after them. They reached the lip of the ravine and cautiously climbed out.

As Percy was helping Hermione up, Dumont pointed to the woods a few feet off where Harry, Hermione, and Ron had been portkeyed.

"We'll go as deep into the forest as possible," she said. "Then I'll work on setting up a portkey in there—The Dark Lord and his followers haven't been here long enough to know the land..."

"I thought you were going to kill us," Harry blurted out as the woman stopped talking. "Up there, in the entrance hall." She silenced and looked at him and the stolid face that had so resembled Logan Price now relaxed into what could have been the face of a very unsure child.

"I wasn't planning on it," she said apologetically. "I was roughened up a bit by Logan and I couldn't tell who you kids were at first—but this isn't exactly a time for apologies. We're still out in the—"

She was cut off.

"**THERE! THAT'S THEM!**"

There was a large group of cloaked figures on the other side of the bridge, pointing at them.

"Oh no," Percy and Hermione muttered in unison.

"GO!" Harry screamed just as several curses flew their way. "Come ON, JADE!" he grabbed her hand and ran after them. Dumont sent as many curses as she could while running. Hermione had her wand drawn and was looking cautiously over her shoulder.

"Abscindo!" she cried out, pointing her wand towards the bridge. It took her several tries, but at last the severing charm found its mark and the decrepit bridge fell away.

Dumont glanced at her looking impressed.

However, they were not out of the clear yet. Another dozen Death Eaters were already on this side of the ravine and they closed in on them from either side. Harry and the others were only a few feet from the edge of the forest now, and they pressed on harder than before.

"Split up!" Dumont cried out, sending a curse over her shoulder with Godric's sword. She and Percy ran to the right while Ron, Hermione, and Harry, dragging Jade, tore to the left. They plunged into the woods and the further they ran the dimmer the light grew as the foliage became thicker high above them. They could hear curses ricocheting off tree trunks all around them, and they dived forward as fast as possible, taking care of exposed roots and large rocks that could twist an ankle.

They ran on until they could barely breath. Suddenly Jade stopped abruptly, bungee-cording Harry back so that he fell to the ground on his rear. Ron and Hermione stopped to help him up.

"Jade!" Harry hissed before urging Hermione and Ron on. "Keep moving." And he grabbed for Jade's hand again as he, Hermione, and Ron broke forward—but she cleverly slipped it away as he ran and the three found themselves breaking through a cluster of trees—and falling straight into a shallow pond.

"Will I never be dry again?" Ron groaned sitting up and pulling a lily pad off his face. Harry sat up sputtering and beside him, Hermione pushed her sodden tresses hastily from her eyes.

"She tried to warn us about the pond," she said as Jade stepped towards them. At first, Harry thought that she was back to normal. He was disappointed to see the empty expression still upon her features. Sighing inwardly, Harry got up and he and Ron helped Hermione to her feet. Together, they climbed awkwardly out of the water, their shoes squishing on the low grass.

"I hope Percy's all right," Ron said quietly, the worry seeping into his voice as he turned to examine their surroundings.

"I think he'll be all right—Dumont's with him," Harry said squinting in attempts to better his vision. Ron cast him a look as if to say, "and I'm suppose to be comforted by that?" but Harry looked away and continued to peer through the foliage.

"Do you think we lost the Death Eaters?"

"I hope so," Hermione said, tightly grasping her wand in her right hand. Ron drew his too and they stood in silence, straining their ears.

Faintly, they could make out yells somewhere to the east, towards the castle, but they could see no one but themselves. Had their breaths not been caught painfully in their chests, or their minds not reeling with anticipation, the beauty of the woods they were in would have captured them.

Suddenly, bushy undergrowth near them rustled unsettlingly. Harry, Ron, and Hermione jumped in surprise and their heads snapped towards the now innocently still brush. The only sound was from a gaggle of birds lifting their wings to make for the skies.

Harry could hear his pulse in his ears now over the stifling silence...and he had no wand to help his friends if the situation were to lead to that.

Suddenly the brush moved again and two people burst from the leaves.

“ARGH!” Harry, Hermione, and Ron screamed.

“AHHH!” Percy squealed, falling backwards into Dumont. It took both groups a moment to catch their breath.

“God, we thought you were Death Eaters!” Harry exclaimed.

“Percy,” Ron gasped. “Have you ever heard of ‘tip-toeing’? Honestly, you walk like you’ve got elephants strapped to your feet!”

Percy didn’t answer. Instead he pushed himself clumsily up and walked towards his younger brother. He didn’t say anything—just sort of shook his head apologetically. Suddenly, he awkwardly leaned forward and wrapped his arms around his brother. Ron struggled to free himself, but soon gave in and hugged Percy back—there was no denying he had feared for Percy’s life.

No one said anything for a while, just watched Ron and Percy silently reconcile. At last, Ron pulled away, pushing his hand through his hair, his cheeks burning as he caught Harry and Hermione’s eyes.

“Ron, I’m honestly sorry,” Percy began but didn’t finish, because Ron wouldn’t let him.

“Forget it,” he said. “You couldn’t have known.” Percy smiled gratefully at him and he grinned back

“What do we do now?” Hermione asked looking nervously around. Dumont looked at her thoughtfully.

“I’ll set up a portkey,” Dumont said. “To the French Ministry—they’ll have better tools to send you all back to Hogwarts. But first—” And shocking them all, she raised up the gold, bejeweled blade in a dangerous striking mode.

“What are you doing?!?” Harry cried out surprised.

“I’m going to destroy the Guardian,” she said quietly—almost apologetically. “Before it falls into the wrong hands.”

“She’s not an *it*,” Harry exclaimed. “She’s a person—she’s our friend!”

“*She* is *it*,” Dumont retorted passionately and stepped forward. “I’m sorry, but I have to destroy her—if only you knew.”

“You can’t!” Hermione cried out pulling on the professor’s arm. “That’s murder! She isn’t a *thing*!”

“I’ve taken every precaution to prove that that girl is the Guardian,” Dumont said, her eyes never leaving Jade’s. “I’ve watched her—first it was the pendant. Then it was her lack of memory—the Latin, her quickness in potions. I knew she would draw You-Know-Who to Hogwarts if I didn’t get rid of her—at first I just wanted her out of the school, away from us...but when I met up with Logan in Hogsmeade—I knew I had made a mistake.”

“What did you do?” Ron asked angrily pointing his wand at her. She looked over at him, glancing at the wand as if it were something quite insignificant.

"I had to convince Jade that she was the Guardian," Dumont explained. "I've been keeping tabs on her for my brother—even though I resented him—he refused to believe our parents weren't murdered. I knew he could have a say in the Ministry that would override Dumbledore's influence and the girl would be removed from Hogwarts—I had no idea he had taken to my parents' endeavors and wanted the Jade Guardian for the Dark Lord."

"But I kept a close eye on you four," Dumont continued. "Especially her—" she paused enough to cast a hesitant glance Jade's way—"Snape had doubts about her innocence as well, but he would follow Dumbledore to hell. If she was the Guardian—then she could be convinced of it—she would change—if she weren't, then no one would come to harm. And if she was, the Ministry would force Dumbledore to hand her over—she'd be out of Hogwarts...and away from me. So I gave her my Study Guide and carefully marked the chapters on Manifested Powers—but then Professor Lupin figured out my intentions and cleverly removed those chapters. I managed to put them back right before that girl sent you to the hospital wing during the spring Promenade, Potter."

"It was you," Harry breathed disbelievingly.

"It was also me who encouraged her to search the Restricted Section for her past," Dumont replied. "And she did—her façade fell away as fast as she put two and two together."

"But how could you know for sure?" Hermione demanded. "And Dumbledore? Why would he keep something so dangerous at Hogwarts if Jade was the Guardian?"

"Because Jade did not seem to possess the power of the Spirit of Vengence—she was very much as vulnerable as any other youth her age...she even bled. Dumbledore felt that he could preserve her that way. He felt that was the best way to keep the Guardian out of You-Know-Who's hands."

"But I knew he couldn't keep it up forever—how could you fight a past and a destiny already set? If I could convince her and change her, why couldn't the Dark Lord? There were people out there who were already suspicious of Jade—I couldn't live knowing I could have prevented catastrophe if Dumbledore's plans didn't work."

"But she's human," Percy broke in. "I know the Ministry was suspicious of the girl, but you can't deny that she's a person!"

"I don't know how she became flesh," Dumont returned never whipping away her icy gaze from Jade. "I'm not even sure how she ended up at Hogwarts—but I'm sure of one thing: she's not a person—not like you or I. I'm going to destroy her—and redeem myself for what my parents did. They wanted to destroy the wizarding world and I want to save it."

She stepped sure-footedly towards Jade. Ron made a move to curse her but Dumont blocked it skillfully.

"She is the Guardian—," she was chanting more to herself than anyone else. "I have to prevent disaster—." She moved forward like a pouncing cat.

"No!" Harry cried out and threw himself in front of Jade. "You're just as crazy as your brother!" At that Dumont paused in mid swing, her eyes glazing over. Harry turned to face Jade, grabbing her shoulders.

"Tell her you aren't the Guardian," he commanded shaking her. "Tell her." Jade just stared blankly at him—even without his glasses, he was certain of that. Then slowly, her mouth opened as if she made to speak.

"I—" Jade started quietly.

"Go on, tell her," Harry encouraged.

"I am the Jade Guardian."

Harry slapped his forehead in utter frustration.

"Work with me here," he hissed. In the nine months that he had known her, she had not been the Guardian—why couldn't she fight it off now?

“No, Jade,” Hermione said stepping towards them. “You heard Professor Dumont—she tried to convince you.” Behind her, Dumont was quivering as if she had a bad case of the flu. It looked as if she could barely hold up the sword.

“If you kill her,” Percy spoke up. “You’d be doing it all for the wrong reasons—you’d be just as blind as Mr. Price—or me.”

Dumont raised the blade again, her face contorting with the strain. Harry knew she was unsure—knew that she felt that she had handed Jade over to Voldemort.

“You only want to kill because you think that will make up for what your parents did to the wizarding community,” Harry insisted. “But can you kill her knowing that you could be wrong? That there may be a way to save her?”

Dumont was shaking; her gray eyes were filled with tears of guilt and frustration. She raised the sword again.

“I can,” she hissed. “And I will—the Guardian won’t come back with us!” And with that, she pushed Harry into Ron, Hermione and Percy. They fell on top of each other and quickly tried to leap to their feet in attempts to save Jade.

“Don’t!” Hermione was crying out, clenching her eyes shut as she tried to get up. Even in their tangled struggle, they could hear Darcy Dumont hiss in vehemence. Harry watched helplessly as Dumont brought up the sword and prepared to drive it into the girl he had come to accept as his friend—the girl who may not have been a human to begin with.

The woman hesitated for only a second, but the fierce gleam in her eye spoke of her determination to carry out her intended plans of elimination.

It was a second too long. Around them, the foliage seemed to burst and bleed black as a swarm of cloaked figures descended on them.

“Stupefy!” a Death Eater cried out and Dumont was stunned, the sword falling between her and Jade. Harry’s head whipped around to find that they were surrounded.

\* \* \*

They were herded back towards the castle at wand point crossing the ravine over a magically enforced bridge that replaced the one Hermione had severed. Percy and Dumont were beside them—a cloaked figure on Dumont’s left held the two swords she had carried and another had taken away Ron, Hermione, and Percy’s wands.

Harry caught glimpses of Ron and Hermione’s pale faces beside him as they were forced through the entrance hall once more, except, instead of going towards the dark hall, they were led up the grand staircase.

Gradually, with every step, a burning started along Harry’s scar until it was ablaze with pain. Tears further blurred his vision so that he tripped over Jade’s feet and crashed to the ground. The Death Eater nearest him grabbed the back of his robes.

“Get up,” he commanded and Harry was nearly knocked back down by the voice. He knew that tone, he couldn’t have recognized it more quickly had he been sitting in the dungeon classroom at Hogwarts—it was Snape.

Harry quickly stumbled to his feet and refrained from turning around, but he was nearly sure that his Potions Master was standing just behind him.

They were commanded to stop when they reached a massive pair of doors. Two of the cloaked servants of Voldemort ran forward and pushed them open and they were ushered forward into what appeared to be a throne room. It was easily the most beautiful room in the castle with its high ceilings and its many detailed columns.

“Harry Potter—what an unexpected surprise,” came a high-pitched voice from a figure standing at the end of the chamber. Ron, Hermione, and Percy stopped in their tracks and Harry could feel them catch their breath.

“And you brought company,” the figure added turning to reveal his bone-white face and red snake-like eyes. Lord Voldemort stood before them, dressed in black velvet robes. He was taller now, thicker too, as if his slowly gaining power added weight to his body.

Harry stiffened and stood up straight though his head was pounding now along the line of his scar. His fear was numbed by the pain and anger that was building inside his breast at the sight of the creature that had killed his parents, Cedric, and countless others—who now threatened his friends. Harry had to struggle to not become stupidly arrogant or emotional.

“Voldemort,” he said and even managed to turn his grimace into a brief, defiant smile. The Death Eaters behind him pushed him, Hermione, Ron, Percy, Dumont, and Jade to their knees as those who weren’t covering them with their wands inched forwards on all fours to kiss the hem of the Dark Lord’s robes.

Harry forced his head up as the sweat trickled down his neck from the pain and found Logan Price, still armed with a silver sword, and a cloaked figure he was sure was Peter Pettigrew by the silver hand that protruded from one sleeve, standing beside Voldemort. At the Dark Lord’s feet was a massive, acid-green serpent—Nagini.

They kneeled there in silence: Death Eaters behind and around them, Voldemort, Price, and a masked Pettigrew before them. Dumont glared hotly at her brother, and beside her, Hermione, Ron, and Harry’s eyes never left the Dark Lord’s. Jade was the only figure beside Voldemort who seemed non-pulsed by the situation.

“I’m sorry I came so late,” Voldemort said mockingly, fingering the velvet hem of his robes. “But I had a bit of a hard time with the Minister—you heard about that, didn’t you? I figured it was both a good ploy to keep the Aurors busy and a way to maybe see if I could pull some strings in the Ministry.” He paused and looked mildly annoyed at the memory.

“But at last, that imprudent Fudge threw himself out of the third-story window before I could put him under the Imperius curse—no matter, however, as I now have the Guardian.”

“Minister Fudge—” Percy stuttered in shock. “Fudge is dead?”

“As a doornail,” Voldemort replied.

“Harry,” Hermione whimpered quietly. Voldemort raised the muscles above his bare brows inquisitively at the sound of her voice and stepped towards them, Price, Pettigrew, the serpent trailing behind him.

“These,” he said cunningly clasping his hands behind his back, “must be your trusty sidekicks”—he paused to look at Percy in a sort of indifferent mockery—“you must be Logan’s assistant.” Percy turned away as Voldemort sneered at them. He reached out with his bone-white, spindly fingers and Harry’s scar burned with a fresh wave of pain. The fingers danced before his eyes before gently taking hold of Hermione’s chin. Instantly, Harry felt a rage that easily equaled the searing along his scar in intensity.

“Don’t,” he shot sharply as Hermione wrenched her head away. Beside her Ron was also fired up, and the words left his mouth before he could stop them.

“Keep your hands off her!” he demanded his eyes wide with fear, but his voice was threatening and Nagini hissed at him, her fangs dripping poison.

“Hold your tongue,” Voldemort said easily commanding the snake away, pointing his wand straight at Ron. Binds whipped out of thin air and wrapped around his mouth.

“Your friend could do with a little lesson in respect, Harry,” Voldemort hissed amusedly, twirling his wand lazily.

Harry bit his tongue and looked over at Ron who was struggling to pull the binds from his mouth. Hermione turned to look at him and there were tears brimming in her eyes. Slowly, she looked past Harry and glanced at Jade—and Harry realized their predicament.

Jade was the Jade Guardian—the question of how or why she was didn’t hide the fact that she was the Spirit of Vengeance. In the hands of a dark wizard as powerful as Voldemort, the wizarding community stood hardly a chance.

“Get up,” Voldemort ordered, commanding their attention. They were roughly pulled to their feet. “My young servant here tells me you’ve found out about my Jade Guardian. And that you escaped him during your chance meeting in the dungeons with the help of a sword-wielding sibling.” The Dark Lord turned so that his robes swished around his thin figure and he stared hard at Dumont.

“An invitation was extended to you, Darcy,” Voldemort whispered. “Just like Logan—look what’s become of your disloyalty to your parents.”

“If I followed you,” she returned and looked past Voldemort to her brother accusingly, “I would have been disloyal to myself.” It was the second time Harry had ever seen Logan Price flinch—the first was when he shook hands with Jade.

Voldemort smiled a lipless sneer and turned to look at Jade. He stepped over and picked up the pendant that dangled from the fine chain around her neck.

“What’s she to you?” Harry demanded. “You can’t turn her into the Guardian.” Voldemort’s sneer widened and he raised a finger, dropping the pendant. He stood before Jade and clapped his thin palms together a hair away from her face and the sound was like thunder within the chamber. Jade didn’t even blink.

“You might not know it,” Voldemort said in quiet triumph. “But that’s proof that I’m getting pretty damn close.” He stared at her almost nostalgically. “And I even have the spell that will allow me to take possession of it—Dumbledore must of done something to lock her powers in flesh where it can’t be touched—but now that she has remembered...now that she’s slowly fading away—I’d like to thank you for that, Darcy.”

Voldemort regarded Dumont with a cold grin and shame seem to wash over her. Her cheeks began to redden and the curls around her head shook with the tremor that had rippled through her body.

Suddenly, she let out a war cry that was so fervent it startled the surrounding death eaters and they fell back. Dumont pushed Percy aside and dove for the Death Eater holding the two swords. Their bodies hit the ground, the Dark Lord’s servant’s cry muffled by his mask. The swords clattered away and Dumont rolled over and snatched one up. With a single thrust, one Death Eater was dead. She plunged forward, trying to hack through the cloaked figures holding Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Jade.

But even her speed and accuracy couldn’t save her.

Nagini sped towards her and sunk it’s fangs into her thigh. Dumont stumbled but held her balance, tearing herself away. She teetered as Voldemort drew his wand and strode towards her without a single regard for the weapon she held in her hands. Dumont faltered from the poison and her eyes began to glaze but still she brought the blade up. Her sword came down, but Voldemort easily blasted it aside. Harry winced as it clattered against the far wall. Voldemort swept up close to the young woman and grabbed her throat. She struggled against the bone-white hand and Harry and the others could do nothing but watch as the Death Eaters held them back.

“No,” Price spoke up, a pleading note in his voice as he stepped forward. “Wait.” Voldemort ignored him and continued to squeeze the woman’s throat.

“That wasn’t a very clever move,” he hissed, the snake-like eyes narrowing as he brought his face close to hers. “But before I kill you—know that it is because of you—the world is mine.” And with that, he pressed his wand to her throat. Dumont’s gray eyes were wide and she cast one forlorn look at Price before her gaze fell on Jade.

“I’m sorry—,” she murmured. “Cognito...remember—”

“Avada Kadavra,” Voldemort said, cutting her off. Bright green light cascaded over them and Harry’s head threatened to split open. It faded at once and Darcy Dumont was dead.

“No!” Price cried out and tried to race forward as his sister’s body crumpled to the ground, but Pettigrew held him back with his silver hand. Harry was staring at Dumont’s still form in shock, feeling the bile prickle and burn his throat. Hermione was gasping, her hands shaking even as she pressed them to her mouth and Ron—who’s own mouth was bound—was making an indiscernible sound of horror. Beside him, Percy had crashed to his knees and retched.

“Why?” Price was demanding—for once the scorn for his sister was gone and he seemed wounded by her murder. “Why did you have to kill her?” Voldemort turned and glared at him as if he were thoroughly annoyed.

“Because I didn’t like her,” he replied simply.

“I—I didn’t want her to die!” Price cried out and tore his arm from Pettigrew’s grip. “You said you wouldn’t hurt Darcy—!”

“Yes, but that was *before* she tried to attack me with a sword,” Voldemort returned.

“You—”

“Oh, stop your sniveling, you weak pathetic, boy!” Voldemort spat having reached the end of his patience. He turned on the young man, the red snake-like eyes flashing. “Your loyalty was never what I was after—I wanted your drive. I knew if I made you think your parents gave their lives to find that pendant you would too—and you would succeed.”

“What?” Price said startled. He stumbled towards his master, his face pale. His gray eyes flickered to the body of his sister. “What do you mean you made me think my parents gave their lives to find the pendant?” he asked shakily.

“I mean, you fool,” Voldemort spat and his voice rose to a frightening pitch. “That you’re parents along with Karkaroff and a handful of others betrayed me! You have spent your life following a false cause and you’re just as fallible as they were!”

Price’s eyes widened and his body shook as he stumbled to the ground.

“You, Logan Price,” Voldemort said lowering his tone. “Are more a slave to your own insignificance than a servant to me.”

“No,” Price whispered staring at his dead sister—and finally looking up at Jade who was silent and unaware of the destiny he had ultimately brought her too.

“Yes,” Voldemort said. “No one knew—but I did. I would have killed your parents myself if they didn’t die the night they went after the Jade Guardian—those who went after it were too weak to make any use of such a power.”

“She was right,” Price muttered, clutching at his heart. He looked up at Voldemort and hate filled his face. “You’re going to pay.” Nagini hissed at him but he didn’t back away.

“Will I?” the Dark Lord said, sneering that lipless grin. “I have gotten the Guardian—and you, you have gotten the truth.” Price was gripping his sister’s silver sword, and slowly he got up. Voldemort turned away from him and snapped at Pettigrew.

“Wormtail,” he commanded. “Disarm him—”

“Expelliramus,” Pettigrew cried out and before Price could attack, the sword flew from his hands.

“No,” Price repeated before diving towards Pettigrew—his hands wrapped around the hilt and the blade so that blood began to trickle down the mirrored surface. Voldemort calmly took aim with his wand from mere feet away.

“Reducto!” he commanded and the curse hit Price head on, sending him and the sword soaring across the room and into the far wall. Price hit hard and slid down into a still heap. Pettigrew backed away and groveled.

“Thank you, master,” he said and Harry felt the angry heat within him rise again.

“Now, on to matters regarding you,” Voldemort said pushing past the half bent figure of Wormtail. He reached forward and placed a hand on Jade’s shoulder, pulling her away from the others.

Harry knew he had to do something—if not, Jade would be dead, and Voldemort would get the power of Medraut.

“The Jade Guardian—at long last,” Voldemort breathed staring at the girl. “She’s a bit more solid than I imagined—but there she is, isn’t she?”

“Don’t touch her,” Harry hissed and he tried to step forward, but a strong hand held him back.

“I first stumbled across the myth of this Manifested Power during my fifty years of evolution,” Voldemort explained in an air of eerie nostalgia. “It was a hobby of mine, you could say, to gather information on vessels of power. I wasn’t sure it actually existed until a whistle-blower amongst my servants told me that several of my own death eaters had found it—and were planning to use it to overthrow me...it doesn’t matter now, as they’re all dead. I also received news that the Ministry was interested in it, which further proved to me that it did exist—but how it eluded me for so long.”

“You can’t get it,” Harry said fiercely. “You can’t get to that power—somehow Jade being a human being has locked it away from you.”

Voldemort looked at him and a cunning smile evolved on his flat face.

“Maybe you just need the right key,” he sneered mockingly. Voldemort stepped over the dead Death Eater indifferently and picked up the golden sword with the jade-emblazoned hilt. He straightened and swung it lightly in his hands, stepping towards Jade again.

“Watch, Harry,” he hissed and plunged the blade into Jade’s stomach.

“NO!” Hermione cried out, covering her eyes with her hands, Ron was choking in shock and Percy tried to scramble away from his captors. Harry’s insides quivered and the voice of his mother rang through his ears—she died because she didn’t want this being destroyed.

The golden blade had penetrated the width of Jade’s body and protruded out her back—yet she didn’t even double over. In fact, she seemed completely unfazed.

Voldemort, looking triumphant, slid the sword out and Harry’s breath caught in his throat as he realized that Jade was completely unharmed.

“What have we done?” Percy whispered hoarsely staring anxiously at the girl who continued to stare blankly off into space.

“I wouldn’t call that very human,” Voldemort said examining the craftsmanship of the sword he held. “She is no longer flesh—the power of the Jade Guardian is no longer locked away.”

“Jade—,” Harry muttered, hardly able to speak.

Voldemort stepped over Dumont’s dead body and turned to look at his captives. His fingers caressed the hilt of the sword as he stared at Harry—and the hatred was clear.

“It seems, Harry Potter,” Voldemort said calculatingly. “That your luck—for that is all that saved you from me before—has run out. You haven’t your wand, and there are no tools for Priori Incantatum to buy you time...but then, it isn’t really death you fear—is it, Harry?”

Harry defiantly pressed his lips in a thin line and didn’t answer. He wasn’t going to go without a fight, that’s for sure. Voldemort smiled amusedly and snapped his fingers. Pettigrew scuffle towards him and awaited his command.

“Bring Mr. Potter closer to me, Wormtail.”

“Yes, master,” Pettigrew replied and hurried forward. He grabbed Harry tightly above the elbow. Harry struggled, but the more he twisted the more tightly the little man held so that the silver hand threatened to break his arm.

“I saved you,” Harry hissed in disgust as he was shoved forcefully forward. Pettigrew didn’t respond. Harry would have fought back, but the closer he got to the dark lord the more wrathfully his scar burned. He blinked furiously to clear the black spots from his eyes and stared up with as much courage as he could muster at Voldemort.

“I think,” the serpentine wizard hissed. “You deserve more than death.” And he pointed the gold sword straight at Harry, who stopped struggling enough to straightened bravely.

“No, stop!” Ron cried out, having torn the binds from his mouth. He and Hermione kicked at their captors in attempts to help their friend and broke free. But Voldemort had redirected the sword from Harry onto them.

“Crucio!”

“NO!” Harry cried out as Hermione and Ron hit the floor. Their bodies jerked and their screams filled the chamber so that he thought they would go on forever. Harry’s stomach jerked as he struggled forward, yelling for Voldemort to stop. But Pettigrew’s grip was strong, and all Harry could do was watch—he felt then that he would rather suffer the Cruciatus curse endlessly than see his friends in so much pain.

Percy broke forward and tried to wrestle a wand away from a Death Eater behind him. He yelled fiercely and managed to obtain one but he was knocked with “stupefy” before he could deliver a curse to help his brother.

“Stop! BLOODY STOP IT!” Harry was screaming, and tears formed hotly in his eyes—he would die a million times if Voldemort would just stop.

Voldemort looked over at him, his face revealing his enjoyment and at last, he lifted the curse. Ron and Hermione lay were they fell, twitching and gasping for breath. Their faces were pale and slick with sweat, and Harry felt his knees go weak. He looked up at Voldemort with a loathing so deep it scared him.

“You liked that, didn’t you Harry?” Voldemort said. “You would rather die than see your friends suffer—how noble, like your parents. And your friends—they would fight to save you—loyal sidekicks indeed.”

“Leave them alone,” Harry retorted quietly. “It’s me you want—just leave them alone.”

The pale figure blinked his red eyes at him.

“You’ve got that partially right,” he said as Nagini swirled around her master’s legs. “I don’t want you as much as I just want to see you suffer. I also want”—he stepped forward and pulled Jade towards him, draping an arm around her shoulder—“what she’s got.”

There was a murmur of excitement from the crowd of Death Eaters and they pressed in with anticipation. Voldemort looked up at them, his eyes narrowing and they were instantly silenced.

“Take Potter’s friends away—that unconscious red-head too,” Voldemort commanded holding Jade to his side. “Feel free to torture them as much as your little cold, empty hearts desire—but make sure they’re alive—I want Harry to see their deaths. All of you—leave!”

Harry watched helplessly as the death eaters fell back pulling Ron, Hermione, and Percy to their feet and dragging them away. They trickled out like a stream of black oil as Harry struggled against Pettigrew, both disgusted and fearful.

Voldemort turned to look at him and Pettigrew who held him fast.

“You too, Wormtail,” he commanded sharply. Pettigrew looked up at his master and hesitantly let go. Harry fell away and landed on his knees.

“But—But master—I am loyal—,” Pettigrew stuttered pointing at his chest with his silver hand.

“It’s not a question of your loyalty, fool!” Voldemort retorted. “It is your wizard’s debt to this boy that can ruin everything! Now go before I punish you!” Gasping, the little man groveled and walked from the chamber backwards, shutting the doors as he left.

Harry scrambled to his feet and glanced around the room. Near Dumont’s crumpled body was a gold, bejeweled sword—he could reach it, if he just dived for it. He looked up at Voldemort who was examining the jade pendant around Jade’s neck again. Now or never, Harry thought and skidded towards the blade. His hands wrapped around the hilt and he lifted it up, feeling slightly comforted by the familiar weight of Godric Gryffindor’s sword.

“Keep it, Harry,” Voldemort said without even glancing at him. “I’m sure it’ll make you feel much safer.”

“Aren’t you going to kill me?” Harry demanded trying to remember the handful of lessons Lupin and Dumont had taught him about dueling with swords. He wasn’t going to let Ron, Hermione, and Percy die...he wasn’t going to let him take the Guardian...as long as he breathed.

“Oh yes,” Voldemort replied straightening, dropping his hand to caress Nagini’s fierce, diamond shaped head. “But first, I want you to bear witness to the second greatest infliction on the wizarding world—the first was my rebirth for which you supplied your blood. I think that your presence is only appropriate. The boy who was my downfall because of a series of lucky events—will be brought down along with all those who are important to him in another series of events much more unfortunate.” Harry’s jaw clenched and his fist tightened around the hilt of the bejeweled sword as Voldemort continued.

“I want you, Harry, to see what your parents gave their lives for—your mother could have prevented it all had she just destroyed the Guardian...you will see the outcome of her hesitance.” Voldemort swept his black robes around his long body, and stared at Jade.

“Watch one friend fade away and become my key to omnipotence. And after that, you will watch your loyal companions die—what were their names?”

“Ron and Hermione,” Harry spat. “And they’re not going to die.” Voldemort laughed maliciously and Harry felt his blood heat and burn his face. He plunged forward, no longer caring whether or not he could take the Dark Lord. He swung his sword back, but before he could strike, Voldemort turned, and cast the cruciatus curse on him. Harry hit the ground hard and his body burned and chilled in a way far worse than he could remember—his head throbbed and his skin felt like it was on fire. At last, it ended and he rolled away, stumbling shakily to his feet again, clasping the sword to his chest.

“Do you want to suffer more?” Voldemort asked nonchalantly. Harry bit his lip and staggered forward, holding the sword out before him with both hands.

“Imperious!” Voldemort said pointing his sword at him. That familiar feeling of calm and bliss washed over Harry and for a split moment he could feel his mind detach from his hurt body. The qualms began to drift away—but there was something different this time—he could see Voldemort and Jade faintly before him—but he found he no longer had a care about the outcome of the situation—there was neither pain, or even a wizarding world here within the expanses of his peace.

“Watch Harry,” Voldemort commanded and Harry did, no thought entering his mind. Voldemort turned to face Jade—looking as if he was reveling in his moment of triumph.

“Excio ad me vox,” he said and at those words, something stirred in Harry.

That sounds familiar, he thought, and the image of the dark lord and Jade grew sharper. Where had he heard those words before? He noticed now that Jade was beginning to change—she was growing translucent—like milk after it’s settled.

“Adsuevi exicio ad auditio,” she replied and her low, raspy tone grew more and more hollow.

Those were the words mum spoke, Harry realized as the image of the two figures before him grew even sharper. That was the spell to take possession of the Guardian—his mother had used it! And now, Voldemort nearly had possession of it himself!

“NO!” Harry screamed, wrenching himself from the numbing solitude. He launched his frame at Voldemort and they fell away from Jade.

“It’s too late Potter!” Voldemort cried out, pushing him aside. “Reducto!” The blasting curse hit Harry hard and he slid across the stone floor, smacking his head against the wall. He blinked both stars and blood from his eyes, trying in vain to push himself up, nearly falling on top of Logan Price’s still body, which lay near him. Harry sat there, sprawled with his back against the wall, trying to catch his breath.

“If you want to duel the ancient way,” Voldemort said striding up to him. “I’ll be happy to appease you—you’ll live long enough for a little torment even without one of your appendages.” And with that, he brought down the simple gold blade over Harry’s legs.

“ARGH!” Harry cried out, shutting his eyes and swinging Godric’s sword up with all his might. He was surprised to hear a sharp clang of metal meeting metal, and his green eyes snapped open to find he had blocked Voldemort’s swing—and somehow, Godric Gryffindor’s sword was still intact, though a sword that could cut through stone had hit it.

Voldemort fell back, his face suddenly growing livid with anger. Harry scrambled to his feet and took the defense position he had remembered Dumont demonstrating for them in class.

“I can play this game,” Voldemort hissed. “I’ve been trained for this too.” And he swung around, bringing the blade with him. Harry ducked away and tried to deliver blow after blow, but Voldemort skillfully blocked each attack with ease. They danced around the chamber, Harry’s green eyes never leaving the serpentine, red ones.

“You could be great Harry,” Voldemort finally said, though he didn’t try to hide his distaste, “I would extend an invitation to you just as I’ve extended one to my betrayers’ children.”

“I’d rather die,” Harry replied.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” Voldemort sneered and delivered another swing.

“Ahh!” Harry cried out, nearly dropping his sword—a cut was opened on his right arm and he could feel the blood seep down his sleeve. Harry looked up at Voldemort, clasping his hand over the cut, feeling as if there was no way out—he was fighting a wizard that was beyond his capabilities—beyond many of the most powerful within the wizarding world. And Harry was alone—defending himself and his friends with blurry vision, a sword, and a whole lot of wishful thinking.

I can’t give up, Harry thought. This is for Ron, Hermione—for Jade and the rest of the wizarding community. And with that, he hissed between his teeth and grasped Godric’s sword in both hands once more. *Watch the center of the chest right between the shoulder blades*, Lupin’s voice said in Harry’s ear. *The arms can fake, whereas the chest can’t...*

“Had enough?” Voldemort asked, his lipless sneer not competently hiding his hatred for Harry.

“D’you have to ask?” Harry breathed stepping forward, squinting his eyes to better bring the center of Voldemort’s body into focus. It was barely noticeable—even harder because the subtle glare of light on the velvet robes was blurry and hard to distinguish—but it was there. Voldemort was going to strike left.

Harry brought up his blade and felt the force from the two hitting swords vibrate satisfactorily through his body. He stabbed forward, and sliced through Voldemort’s thick, velvet robes to the skin. The Dark Lord whirled around looking frightfully angered, hissing as he peered at the impossibly dark blood trickling from the small wound on his side. Harry was so taken back by the fierce eyes and the cut that he faltered and stumbled backwards. Voldemort and Nagini hissed, and the loyal serpent swept up towards him and bared her fangs.

“Get away!” Harry yelled, the familiar parseltongue erupting from his throat as he caught sight of the eyes with their vertical pupils. But the snake did not move away—instead it slid stealthily towards him easily within striking distance.

“No, Nagini,” Voldemort commanded, but the snake was already shooting forward with open mouth.

Harry fell backwards and swung the sword wildly in front of him as he crashed to the ground. The blade plunged into the serpents neck and sliced it's acid-green head clear off. Blood bubbled up from the twitching hose of a body and Harry staggered away from the pooling liquid.

“NO!” Voldemort cried out, running to his loyal, dead serpent. He turned and faced Harry with a fury that rivaled that of any hell god. The skull-like face became startlingly calm once more, and he stepped towards Harry, his lips pressed frighteningly tight so that it seemed that he had no mouth at all.

“You,” Voldemort whispered toxically. “Will pay.” And with that, he struck Harry across the face with the hilt of his sword. Harry heard his teeth clatter together as he fell to the ground. His sword, the only weapon he was allotted, skidded away from him.

“Crucio!” Voldemort hollered and the waves of pain washed over the boy who lived, drowning out the furious pain along the line of his scar by a million times. When it stopped, Harry was shaking all over—trying desperately to stay conscious.

“Watch me, Potter!” Voldemort cried out pointing at Jade. “Awake to my voice!” and Jade’s outline grew fainter.

“I am awake and listening,” she said—and the voice was unmistakably the one from Harry’s dream.

Harry lay there, unable to move remembering the visions of his parents—the ones that must have taken place after his parents’ last mission. Why didn’t his mother destroy the Guardian? Why didn’t she prevent all this from happening?

From somewhere far way, Voldemort was throwing back his hairless head and laughing.

But if Lily Potter had destroyed the Guardian—Harry would have never met Jade. That strange connection to her—as if she were a sister—it would have never happened. Harry thought hard, riffling through the inexplicable dreams. There was one in particular that became more and more vivid—one with his mother and father sitting with Dumbledore in his office—Lily had refused to destroy the Jade Guardian.

But why?

Because she had felt connected with the Guardian—because the Guardian had made a conscious choice to go with her even though Lily hardly fit the profile of a power-monger. Harry’s mother felt something when she had possession of the Jade Guardian—she felt it’s consciousness starting to awaken—that’s why she couldn’t destroy it—because it had a cognito—it was Jade.

“Jade,” Harry muttered, trying to pull himself up. “Jade! Don’t listen to him!” Voldemort was still laughing.

“You think she can stop this?” he said sneering. But the sneer fell away as he noticed the girl’s head was turned in Harry’s direction.

“You can stop this!” Harry said. “You’re more than just a vessel of power—more than just a necklace.”

“Quiet!” Voldemort demanded turning to face Jade. “You were created, girl! You are no more alive than the pendant you guard—you don’t exist as a human! You will awake to my voice!”

“NO!” Harry yelled back. “YOU ARE! You’re our FRIEND! Remember?”

“You were created to be commanded,” Voldemort insisted, “Adsuevi exicio ad auditio!”

“JADE CORDONNIER!” Harry hollered fiercely, pushing himself up. “Remember what Lupin said—about Descartes! Do you remember that lesson? You can stop this! You’re a person—with free will and a mind—a Cognito! Just remember that!”

“You can’t stop it, Potter,” Voldemort hissed grasping the gold sword. “Try—you won’t stop it. She’s already changing!”

Jade was staring at Harry now and a funny expression was forming on her face—like she just drank sour milk.

“You think,” Harry said. “Therefore you are—now decide whether you want to be the Guardian or not.”

Voldemort swept towards Harry, raising the sword, preparing to bring it down on him.

“You won’t stop this!” he spat, his red eyes widening maliciously.

“Adsuevi exicio...” Jade began.

“Too late, Potter,” Voldemort said, bringing his face so close, Harry could make out the faint, blue veins beneath the bone-white skin “She’s completing the spell.”

“...exicio ad aud”—Jade paused and Voldemort whipped around—“just kidding.” Smiling wickedly, she reached up and took hold of the jade pendant. The lines of her body began to solidify as she pointed towards Voldemort and yelled, “Expellerimus!” The sword flew from his hands and fell with a clatter beside Logan Price’s still form.

“You’re back!” Harry said, a smile breaking across his face. “Took you long enough.”

“No—” Voldemort hissed in both shock and heated fury. “But how—?”

“Harry’s right,” Jade said narrowing her eyes at the Dark Lord. “I was human in the past—and I can be again—my consciousness and free will were locked away from me by Medraut—but a kind woman gave them back.” She reached up for the jade piece around her neck and pulled so that the chain snapped and fell around her hand.

Voldemort’s slitted nostrils flared and his chest rose and fell to the beat of Harry’s heart. Suddenly, he grabbed Harry by the throat and drew his wand, pressing it against the flesh over his Adam’s apple. Harry gasped, struggling to claw at the bone-white fingers wrapped around his throat—fighting against the burst of pain that traveled across his forehead.

Jade’s face grew pale as she watched and Harry saw that she had grown afraid.

“No, don’t,” Jade said, her voice quivering. “I can’t give you anything—don’t.”

“You can all die then,” Voldemort hissed for he knew nothing of mercy. He turned and hissed in Harry’s ear, “You’re friends will be joining you shortly—Avada—!”

This is the end, Harry thought, and he turned his face away...just in time to see movement in the corner of his eye. Before Voldemort could finish the death curse, a shriek erupted from his mouth. Harry plunged his elbow into the dark lord’s side and fell away. Logan Price, breathing heavily, had stabbed his silver sword into Voldemort’s side.

“Payback!” Price hissed.

Jade’s face darkened at this new opportunity, and she raised the pendant high above her head.

“Watch this!” she cried out fiercely—and threw the pendant onto the ground. It shattered like glass and a gold light engulfed them—much like the light that had surrounded Harry’s mother in his dreams. Harry threw his arm over his head and felt a powerful rippling force blow over him, sending him to the ground. The pieces of the jade square flew in all directions, stinging his face and hands.

In the roar of light, Harry heard Voldemort scream furiously, and then the pain in his scar faded. At last the gold ebbed away—just as it did when his mother took possession of the Guardian in his dreams. Harry lay against the ground for a moment; letting his heart slow its racehorse speed. Slowly, he opened his eyes.

“Where’s Voldemort?” he said, blinking to clear his blurry vision. Light spots danced across his eyes as he pushed himself to his feet.

“Apparated, I reckon,” Price rasped, breathing hard against the far wall. Harry turned away from him and hastily surveyed the damage.

“Jade?” he called before tripping over a sizable chunk of the ceiling. “Jeez—I think Flitwick will give you extra credit for this—” Harry stopped in mid-sentence when he caught sight of a crumpled figure dressed in school robes.

“No,” he muttered shaking his head, running towards Jade’s still form. Blood had drenched her front and was pooling under her—marking the entrance and exit wound from the sword Voldemort had plunged into her.

“Oh no,” Harry said quietly, kneeling down beside her.

“Harry!”

The doors to the chamber where flung open. Hermione, Ron, and Percy dashed into the chamber, followed by Snape, who’s death eater mask was crumpled in one hand. The potions master was limping, nursing one arm as he trailed behind his two pupils.

“Harry!” Ron was saying. “Harry—the Auror’s have arrived—”

“No,” Hermione whispered stopping a few feet away. Ron silenced and came up behind her, stepping towards Harry.

“What happened?” he asked quietly. Harry looked up worriedly at them, before turning his face back to Jade.

“Jade, can you hear me?” Harry asked, shaking the girl’s shoulder gently. Above them, Snape stood, surveying the two figures, one eye swelled so that it was barely a slit. The mask he was holding in his uninjured hand quivered slightly as he took a slow breath. Without saying anything, he knelt beside them and checked the girl for a pulse.

Jade’s eyes fluttered open and she looked up at the crowd gathered above her.

“Don’t move,” Snape said shortly. Jade gasped, swallowing several times as if trying to catch words in her mouth.

“This—,” she managed to rasp, trying to sit up.

“What is it?” Harry asked as Hermione pushed her gently back down. She stared up at them, and her gaze began to glaze over so that it seemed she could hardly look at them at all.

“—most definitely hurts like hell,” she whispered before her body slackened and her eyes rolled into the back of her head.

## 27. Returns and Goodbyes

Harry and Ron packed silently in their deserted dormitory room, tossing armfuls of trousers, shirts, and socks atop schoolbooks at last shut for the year. Dean, Seamus, and Neville had left them to their doings, having already finished stowing away their own items hours before. Maybe it was out of respect that they quickly departed, for the two boys had been uncharacteristically quiet and withdrawn since the event from two weeks prior. Now Harry and Ron moved about their chore undisturbed, only making enough effort in their sloppy packing to ensure that the lids of their trunks would close with little more help than a tap from a wand.

Outside the sky was brushed so vibrantly with light, it blazed a shocking blue. Owls nestled lazily, hidden in the high, shady boughs of the tall forest pines, while other birds, unaccustomed to nocturnal behavior, twittered about in pairs beneath the sun. Most of the students were outside, playing mildly monitored games of quidditch, sitting around the lake with their feet dipped in the icy water, or mingling in the shade of the castle walls all overlooking the repaired village of Hogsmeade. It lay, nearly back to its original prime, just through the ground's gates and down the path.

Up in Gryffindor tower, Harry's mind was somewhere else, as he was sure Ron's was. It had been that way for two weeks now—how either managed to pass the exams that had awaited them days after their return was beyond him.

It was the last full day of the term. Everything had returned to a relative norm, but two weeks ago Hogsmeade was attacked, the Minister of Magic was taken hostage and killed, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione were transported by accident to a strange castle in an unknown land.

It wasn't until they were portkeyed to the French Ministry of Magic (after Harry's confrontation with Voldemort) did they discover that they had been in Lord Medraut's ancient fortress—the very place of the Jade Guardian's creation...and ultimate destruction. After word was sent of Dumbledore's successful putdown of the Death Eater's attack on Hogsmeade, they were sent home—Professor Snape accompanying them without a word, looking as if he was ashamed of not being able to do more.

There was a loud bang as Ron dropped his cauldron. He muttered a quick "sorry" before picking it up and tossing it back into his trunk. Harry turned around and faced his own trunk, feeling his throat go dry at the memory of their return to Hogwarts. Jade did not go with them—Snape had done what he could for her with a bit of torn robes turned compress—before he forced Harry, Ron, and Hermione to leave her to the French Aurors. There was so much blood...

They were told at the French Ministry in Paris that Jade was portkeyed to *L'espoir de Magie*, a notable hospital much like St. Mungo's—but they had received no news about her since. Had circumstances been different, Harry would have demanded to know how Jade was, even pestered Dumbledore about her, but the Headmaster was barely in the castle as he was caught up in the aftermath of Voldemort's strike. Harry felt a bit like Dumbledore's efforts were in vain as the Ministry had yet to announce to the Wizarding public that the attacks on Hogsmeade and the Minster were indeed led by the Dark Lord himself. However, they had admitted the Death Eaters' were growing dangerously active...but, to Harry, it seemed hardly a start.

But even with those pending matters infiltrating his head, Harry felt that they manageable with Ron and Hermione there with him—the very people who stood beside him as he eluded Voldemort once again (though he wondered who'd believe him), but even that wouldn't last. Mr. and Mrs. Granger had turned on the BBC news the night of the Death Eater attacks to hear of a peculiar happening in London—several masked figures in black cloaks had attacked unsuspecting citizens without leaving a trace of evidence other than their battered victims. There was also the two muggles crushed by a strangely dressed man who seemed to have fallen from nowhere right on top of them—it was Cornelius Fudge of course, having leaped from the third story window of his magically hidden flat somewhere over London. This coupled with the news about Hogsmeade from Dumbledore, drove Hermione's parents into a panic and they demanded their daughter return home as planned.

Harry and Ron had watched Hermione's train from the Hogsmeade Station platform leave the next morning. Neither had ever seen her cry with as much desperation as then: waving from the window of her compartment, hoping against hope that she'd be able to return.

There was no denying it—Hogwarts just wasn't the same without their best friend. And more than ever, Harry needed dreadfully to have his friends close to him. They had followed him straight into hell, as Darcy Dumont had said Snape would of Dumbledore. At the thought of Snape, Harry felt his throat grow drier. He remembered the discussion he, Ron, and Hermione had had under the eaves of Hogsmeade station as they awaited her train.

"It was Snape," Harry had said, pushing up the sleeves of his robes to welcome the cool breeze that blew through the fast-recovering village. He paused for a second, watching Hagrid (their chaperone as they were given special permission to accompany Hermione to Hogsmeade) who was speaking to the station master a few feet away. "He saved you two, didn't he? How'd he do it?"

Ron shook his head and looked down at Hermione, his being suddenly revealing a sort of maturity that was visible in both of them—an invisible bit of scar tissue that made it quite clear that the memories of their confrontation with the Dark Lord would be with them forever. Harry was very sorry about that.

"We thought we were goners," Ron admitted finally, shifting and turning to face Harry. "Hermione and me and Percy—we tried to get away to help you—I mean, you were there all alone with You-Know—with Voldemort. And Jade..."

"They took us into the front courtyard," Hermione added as he fell silent. "A few of the Death Eaters tied us up—and Percy tried to argue with them, but in the end, they just gagged him."

"If they didn't, I would of," Ron inserted. "His voice gets all squeaky when he whines—"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him and blew a puff of air irritatedly between her teeth.

"Is it just me," she said, "or does anyone else feel like we're depriving a village somewhere of it's idiot?" Ron grinned proudly and Harry couldn't help the smile that crept upon his face. He turned to find Hermione with a smile too—but it was the drawn and lackluster sort.

"Anyway," she broke in quietly, tucking a bit of her hair behind her ear. "The Death Eaters—a few of them were getting ready to put the Cruciatus curse on us again"—she paused for a bit and both she and Ron shuddered visibly—"But before they could deal it," she continued shakily, "they were blasted away."

"One of them," Ron said, picking up where Hermione trailed off, "pushed forward—I was really scared—figured the bloke had cracked and was going to kill everyone. Anyway, he got Percy loose first and fought off the rest of the Death Eaters. I don't know how he did it, but he managed to fight off a dozen of them. He got Hermione and me free—but it looked like he was hurt something bad and we kept the hexes off of him until he could gather enough strength to fight them some more."

"When it looked like we stood a chance though, a swarm of Death Eaters poured out around us—that was when the French Aurors reached us. It was then, Snape took off his mask and we realized who he was. Apparently, he had notified authorities—"

"Voldemort's inner circle had already grown suspicious of him," Harry inserted thoughtfully. "That's what Dumont meant when she was arguing with Dumbledore a few weeks ago—Snape probably didn't know this was all going to happen in Medraut's fortress until that day, probably because the Death Eaters were keeping him as out of the loop as possible."

"That's what we figured," Hermione said. She sat down on her trunk and continued. "After that, Snape tried to get us to hide in the courtyard while the Aurors scattered the Death Eaters—but he was having a hard time getting up the stairs in the entrance hall alone. In the end, Percy offered to help him and we followed. When we reached the throne room—and we saw the mess...and Jade—Oh, Harry—we thought we were too late."

She looked up at him and her already red eyes were glistening again. Harry swallowed hard; he was suddenly overwhelmed with the same feeling that had made his lungs freeze when he watched her and Ron fall victim to the Cruciatus curse. He turned away from them and kicked at the worn floorboards of the platform.

“That wasn’t s’pose to happen to you two,” he thought, and somehow the words slipped from his mouth.

“Now just wait one moment,” Ron said sternly, punching Harry so hard in the arm he felt his muscles curl in protest. “None of this is your fault—none of it is in your control (and if it was, god help us). Besides we came along voluntarily—well, forcefully if you remember Hermione threatening you with her wand.” Hermione shook her head and brushed his comment aside, though a curious blush appeared on her cheeks.

“You know, when I first saw—Voldemort—,” she said vehemently, blinking the tears from her eyes, and struggling to force the crimson from her face. “I was scared witless—but mostly because I kept thinking of you having to face all of that alone, like last year—Harry if I could prevent it—if I had to see what we saw in France a hundred times and threatened you a thousand more with my wand—I would. To never have you face such a force on your own again.”

“How could you think we’d stay behind?” Ron added, “D’you think we could live with ourselves if we did?”

Harry had been rendered speechless and even though he had been unable to verbalize his gratefulness, the firm nods from both Ron and Hermione signaled their silent acceptance. They made little verbal exchange from then on as they waited for the train—mostly they talked about Jade, each straying away from the possibility that she had become yet another dead casualty of Voldemort.

Harry went to his bedside bureau and swept the various figurines into his arms, taking care not to drop anything. Just as he was adding these trinkets to his trunk, the door to the fifth-year boys’ dormitory was flung open. Ginny spilt into the room, breathing hard, eyes brighter than they had been in days.

“Ginny,” Ron said surprised. “You’re not s’pose to be in here—it’s a *boys*—”

“Shut up and come down stairs!” she exclaimed, grinning broadly. “Oh Ron, you’ll never guess!”

He shot an inquisitive look at Harry before shrugging his skinny shoulders and making for the door after his sister. Harry followed, wondering what was supposed to be so worthy of such haste. They took the stairs two at a time to match Ginny’s break-neck speed, Ron groaning at his sister the whole time.

“Really, Ginny, could you just tell us what—” he’s sentence died away as they reached the Gryffindor Common Room. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were sitting in a sofa near a brightly lit window, conversing with the twins...and Albus Dumbledore.

“Professor Dumbledore,” Harry said raising his eyebrows in shock. The last time he had seen the Headmaster in their common room was before Christmas, just after Jade had mastered speech. Dumbledore nodded at both boys, his eyes, which had been growing duller throughout the year, were now twinkling with a sort of fire rekindled. Ron made to greet the Headmaster respectfully, but in the shock of seeing his parents blurred out, “Mum...Dad” instead.

He and Ginny made towards them, Harry trailing behind, just as shocked as his best friend. Dumbledore looked hardly insulted.

“Oh, Ron,” Mrs. Weasley gasped, clasping her hands together. She was trembling as she weakly got to her feet and reached up to give her son a hug. Ron had said he had to beg her not to storm Hogwarts to see him—it took at least twenty letters from him and his siblings, as well as one from McGonagall to convince her he had all his limbs in proper working order and needed not her worry.

“Mum,” Ron gasped, his eyes bulging as his mother squeezed him tightly. “Mum—you’re bruising my ribs.” She released him and held him at arms length, her eyes misting, though she was looking at her son in admiration.

“Professor Dumbledore’s told us everything,” she said shaking her head. “If only you weren’t so insistent on me not coming—” she paused and turned her face towards Harry. Suddenly, her misting eyes became full-on water works and she fought to dry them quickly. She reached out and beckoned to him. Concealing a smile, Harry walked towards her, secretly awaiting the motherly touch with baited breath.

“Hi, Mrs. Weasley,” he said quietly and she squeezed him so hard, he felt his ears pop. She released him, swiped at yet more tears and turned to her husband.

“Ron,” Mr. Weasley was saying, patting his son on the shoulder. He turned and nodded to Harry, a merry smile on his face, before reaching out and shaking his hand with what was undoubtedly, high regard and it made Harry blush.

“I think your mother and father have some very important news to share with you,” Dumbledore spoke up, smiling warmly. He nodded to Ron and Harry as Fred and George squished together on an adjacent sofa to make room for them.

“Well,” Mr. Weasley began, clapping his hands together. “I know you lot have heard about the charges of conspiracy pressed against me—” Before he could continue though, the twins leaped to their feet, looking as if they could barely contain themselves.

“Ron, Dad’s been cleared—” George blurted out happily.

“He’s a hero,” Fred added. “And it wasn’t even his department!”

“Boys!” Mrs. Weasley practically snarled, swiping at them with her handkerchief. Ron raised his eyebrow at Harry and they looked to Mr. Weasley for clarification. Dumbledore snorted amusedly into his hand as Ginny reached over and poked both twins hard enough in the ribs to make them sit back down.

“That’s the news then,” Mr. Weasley said, shaking his heads at his identical sons.

“Dad—” Ron breathed, a grin forming on his face. “That’s fabulous! How’d—how’d that happen?”

“I guess it started off with that unfortunate attack on the Minister—you’ve heard about that...” Ron’s dad trailed off, now looking a bit uncomfortably.

“What about it?” Harry pressed politely.

“Well, you know Arthur was given an order of mandatory suspension—” Mrs. Weasley spoke up, patting her husband reassuringly on the knee. “But when he heard of the unusual happenings in London—the ones that turned out to be attacks on muggles by Death Eaters—he left immediately, feeling he had to at least try to help.”

“I was still the head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office,” Mr. Weasley explained. “I couldn’t even fathom letting Perkins handle such a populated, muggle settlement like London alone.”

“In any case, I apparated to London, realizing that most of the activity was occurring near Cornelius’s hidden residence. It took quite awhile to convince the Magical Law Enforcement Squad to enter the Minister’s private home—they not being my jurisdiction and all as well as being slightly fearful of the Minister’s wrath as he made it quite clear he wanted no disruptions that weekend.”

It was then Arthur Weasley shook his head solemnly, tightening his lips before bringing up the unfortunate event.

"I forced my way through the magical barrier alongside the Squad," he continued, "just as they got notice from their department at the Ministry that there was a hostage situation in the Minister's home mere yards from where we stood... You-Know-Who was there. At that point, everyone became hesitant—eventually, we mustered the nerve to force our way into the house—the Squad didn't even try to stop me from following. We were too late though—Cornelius panicked and threw himself out of the window. I acted immediately and tore back out into the street to shield the mishap from the muggles as best as I could—but two were already dead. I learned later that You-Know-Who apparted before the Squad got to him...but several Death Eaters were apprehended...one of them was Lucius Malfoy—he would have known the Minister had taken to his London home for a bit of a rest."

At that, Harry's jaw dropped...it shouldn't have been that surprising—he had known Malfoy's father was a Death Eater—but he just never expected the Ministry to catch him.

"That's how we felt," George said, noting Harry's impression of a goldfish out of water. "The little twit's lack of Harry Torment was a little hard not to notice—I guess now we know why. Probably dying of embarrassment."

Harry nodded, but thought Malfoy was suffering from more than just embarrassment. He remembered the uncanny, frightened, gray eyes of his nemesis the day Hogsmeade was attacked...and he wondered just how much Malfoy knew—or didn't know, for that matter."

"I feel dead sorry for his son," Mrs. Weasley admitted. "As dreadful as that boy is...no one should have to see their father in question." And her eyes flashed a bit as she took Mr. Weasley's hand, making it clear that she would always be a bit bitter he had been prosecuted for doing all he could for the sake of the wizarding community...and the non-magical one.

"Arthur risked his life for the Minister and the preservation of our way of living—despite every Ministry stronghold against him, he joined them to fight."

"Now Molly," Mr. Weasley said, blushing furiously. "Please...please don't make it sound more than it is...especially now, with Minister Fudge dead."

"Perhaps," Dumbledore broke in, looking from each Weasley child and Harry through his half-moon spectacles. "You should tell them the most promising news of all—let them know that at least something very wonderful has been born from this tragedy."

"Oh, yes," Mr. Weasley nodded. "Well, besides the charges being dropped on account of my—quote—'obvious display of loyalty', I've been promoted—to head of the Department of Accidental Magic Reversal."

"Dad, that's fantastic!" Ginny squealed leaping up to embrace her father. Harry had never seen her so openly spirited. Mr. Weasley laughed and smiled over Ginny's shoulder at Dumbledore who's face was placid and yet alit. Harry joined in with the chorus of congratulations and it took several moments for Mr. Weasley to quiet them enough to speak again.

"And there's something else," he said his face turning serious. "I've also been nominated and appointed junior Minister..."

All noise seemed to cease. Every face was turned towards Mr. Weasley in a sort of startled awe, with the exception of Mrs. Weasley and Dumbledore.

"That means," Mr. Weasley said a bit uneasily. "I'll be taking over Minister Fudge's duties until the next election."

"No," Ron choked.

"Yes, actually."

"You're going to be heading the Ministry, Dad?" Fred squeaked. Slowly, smiles broke out on everyone's faces. Before Harry had fully comprehended the meaning of the news, he found himself cheering along with the rest of the Weasley children. Mrs. Weasley was beaming at them as they crowded Mr. Weasley excitedly, Ron whooping loudly. It occurred to Harry that for once, Dumbledore's cause would now have a firm foothold within the government—that now, maybe an army that could challenge Voldemort competently could be built. Harry suddenly understood that he had someone in the Ministry with a position of power who believed him.

Dumbledore stood, straightening his long body. He reached out and grasped Mr. Weasley's hand, his head nodding so vigorously his long beard became a silver wave.

"At long last, you are beginning to get the recognition and respect you deserve," he said warmly. "And as you have stood behind me, I will stand behind you." With that he paused thoughtfully before adding, "Though, that may not be the best offering...considering my reputation for being off my plot."

Mr. Weasley chortled and thanked him as Mrs. Weasley grasped Ginny's hand.

"Oh, isn't it all wonderful?" she said dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. "It'll be all over the papers by tomorrow, I can vouch for that!"

At the mention of newspapers, Harry grew painfully nostalgic. He thought of how often he and Ron had crowded around Hermione as she read from her morning issue of the Daily Prophet, and wondered if they would be practicing that tradition next year.

"Haven't read the papers much lately," he mumbled under his breath.

"No," Ron said turning to face him, the cheer suddenly gone from his voice, his tone revealing he was thinking the same thing. "Not since Hermione left."

The room was silent again, and Mrs. Weasley looked at Ron and Harry sadly. Finally, Dumbledore cleared his throat.

"Perhaps you would all like to discuss Mr. Weasley's new duties in detail?" he said. He turned to Harry, nodding warmly. "Would you walk me to my office, Harry?"

Harry knew it was hardly a question and he obliged, knowing that Dumbledore had provided him a time for some answers. He congratulated Mr. Weasley once more, shrugged at Ron and trailed after Dumbledore through the portrait hole.

The Fat Lady nodded appreciatively when Dumbledore thanked her, sliding shut behind them, as was her duty. As soon as they were out of her earshot, Harry turned to Dumbledore.

"Professor, is Jade all right?" he blurted out, anxious for the answer. The Headmaster faced him as they walked as if taking in his every detail. A small smile crept onto his aged lips.

"It wasn't right keeping you, Ron, and Hermione in the dark about her condition," Dumbledore said. "But yes, I have last heard that she is recovering." Harry let out a breath he realized he had been holding painfully. They continued on in silence for a bit, Dumbledore allowing Harry to savor the relief.

"We must talk about Jade," the Headmaster spoke up several minutes later. "But first, I apologize for not meeting with you sooner after your, Ron, Hermione, and Jade's confrontation with Voldemort. You must understand there were many duties I've had to attend to in these past two weeks that could not be postponed—but again, I apologize for not being here to answer the many questions you undoubtedly have."

Harry answered with contemplative silence and Dumbledore walked beside him, patiently awaiting his response. The truth was, though Harry had many questions, he didn't know where to start.

He cast a quick glance at the headmaster again, seeing very clearly the age and wisdom of the elderly man—and for once, the bemused smile upon the weathered face and the weary, yet bright eyes, revealed the truth that Dumbledore was indeed, a mortal—as fallible a creature as any other man that walked the earth. Dumbledore turned and winked at him, and Harry thought perhaps the old man wanted him to see that.

“Did you know about Jade?” Harry finally asked, stopping on a terrace that connected the east tower with the south. “Did you let her into Hogwarts knowing what—who she was?” Dumbledore turned and rested an elbow on the stone grating, peering at the courtyard below where many of his students basked in the young summer heat, speaking about the recent Death Eater attacks...unaware that Harry, Ron, and Hermione had seen first hand, the Dark Lord’s wrath—unaware that Voldemort had nearly succeeded, once more, in taking control.

“If,” Dumbledore said, pushing back the embroidered sleeves of his midnight colored robes, “by that you mean, whether or not I knew Jade was indeed the Jade Guardian—the answer is yes.” Harry looked at the Headmaster, dumbfounded.

“Then—then why did you allow her to stay at Hogwarts?” he choked. “If you knew what she was—what she was capable of—”

“I wasn’t always certain of her true identity,” Dumbledore replied calmly. “You must understand it is hardly plausible—her existence. It was sometime before I was absolutely sure she was the Guardian of that curious pendant. But before I answer your question, Harry—would you allow me to ask one of mine?” Harry nodded, staring straight into those lucid blue eyes framed by half-moon spectacles. The Headmaster smiled and lowered his voice. “Did you know what she was? What she really was?”

Harry blew a quiet breath through his teeth and turned from the wizened form, staring out into the courtyard, knowing that the headmaster meant not the obvious answer. Jade was the Jade Guardian—the confrontation with Voldemort had proved that...*but what was she really?*

“She was a girl,” Harry said slowly. “She was our friend—and she was someone who cared very much for us.” He turned to find Dumbledore smiling faintly. He nodded once.

“The first reason I sheltered her in Hogwarts,” the Headmaster proceeded to explain, satisfied with Harry’s answer, “was to keep her possible identity a secret from both the Ministry, who would inadvertently grow corrupt with such a large amount of singular power, and Voldemort, who undoubtedly was in search of it.

“The second reason—the most important reason—was that if she was the Jade Guardian, by some miraculous series of events, she had been given the chance to live. I couldn’t take that away from her—instead, I allowed her to stay in an environment where she could thrive. Admittedly though, I was uncertain of just how human she had become—I felt that Lord Medraut’s malicious spell still held her and she must be convinced of her cognito in order to suppress the Jade Guardian. Do you remember, Harry, when Logan Price, Dr. McCourt, and Percy came to take Jade under the care of the Ministry?”

“Yes, Professor,” Harry said knitting his brow, shifting as a ray of light glared across one of his lenses. Jade had grown strangely impassive and impartial that December evening at the news that they would be taking her—it wasn’t for very long—but it was long enough to chill Harry straight to the bone. It was as if she had slipped away, leaving only a shell—it was ten times as chilling watching her lose to the bounds of Medraut’s spell before Voldemort.

“That was when I was certain that the best way to keep her away from the hands of the Ministry and Voldemort,” Dumbledore explained, “was to keep her human—there was no foundation that could prove a person of flesh could be this manifested power.”

“So a lie was created for her to live,” Harry said slightly bitter at Fate, whom had destined one girl to spend 1,500 years in will-less servitude.

"It was not a lie, Harry," the Headmaster replied, his bemused smile turning down at the corners slightly. "It was a chance—a chance that had been stripped away from her in her first, natural existence with Medraut. But precautions were taken—the staff didn't press her too much to remember, she was kept away from the Sorting Hat, which could reveal her identity, and she was created a new past. Do you understand, Harry?"

Harry nodded, truly understanding that Jade deserved this turn—the very thought had run through his head as he watched Voldemort try to turn her into the Guardian.

"Shall we continue?" Dumbledore spoke up and Harry followed him away from the terrace.

"And Logan Price was suspicious of who she was, too," Harry said quietly, unable to decide whether or not he was angry with the man for putting the life of his friends in danger.

"Logan is a brilliant man," Dumbledore replied. "He had steadily studied Dark charms and powers since he was released from St. Mungo's eleven years ago—even the Ministry recognized his brilliance and ignored his history."

"What's going to happen to him?" Harry couldn't help asking.

"He is currently at St. Mungo's where he will await a trial—but he has already pleaded guilty—it may have saved him from a sentence in Azkaban." Dumbledore's eyes turned away and he grew quiet. "I thought maybe they could be saved from their parents' past—I had no idea they knew."

Harry's heart quickened at the thought of Darcy Dumont, as he remembered her last attempts at redemption—and Logan Price, who searched for his own brand of release—and in the end, found no cause to right his life by...and then, Harry thought himself lucky. Maybe it was a blessing that if his parents had to die, they passed on before he could know them—before their passing could be so detrimental to him. And yet, there was a dull ache in his heart—and he honestly wished he could miss his parents, but he had not been left any memories to miss them by...except those dreams that had stopped the night he returned to Hogwarts two weeks ago.

He shook his head and forced his thoughts on other things—in particular, the new bits of information that filled in the holes. There was still more to ask—there was still that unshakable feeling of connection with Jade...

"Professor," Harry said as they reached the stone gargoyle that hid the staircase to Dumbledore's study. "How did Jade get here? Was it somehow—it sounds a bit unreasonable—but was it somehow my parents'—my mum's doing?"

"Fizzing Whizbees," Dumbledore said to the gargoyle and it sprang aside. "When we get upstairs—I will share what I know."

They were whirled speedily up the spiraling staircase. When they reached the handsome oak door, Dumbledore turned the knob and pushed it open.

"Sirius!" Harry exclaimed, pleasantly surprised. Sitting in one of the winged-back armchairs before the Headmaster's desk was Harry's godfather.

Sirius stood and met his godson, reaching out and gripping his shoulder.

"I thought I told you to stay away from seriously evil wizards," Black managed with a weak smile, though it was clear that he could hardly stand the idea of Harry stumbling across such danger yet again. Harry smiled and before he realized what he was doing, his arms were around his godfather. It was an awkward hug—as neither party had had much practice—but it was like coming home.

They quickly pushed away and grinned at each other. Dumbledore smiled at both of them as he proceeded to his desk. A flutter of wings found Fawkes gliding onto the Headmaster's shoulder, welcoming both his master and Harry with a wink of his black, bead-like eyes.

"Now I will answer your question, Harry," Dumbledore said, "as I feel that Sirius needs to know as well, the secret that Peter Pettigrew kept." Harry and Sirius looked at each other, each face seriously quizzical, as Dumbledore began to speak.

"Your mother, Harry, possessed the Jade Guardian for nearly a year—she waited patiently for the Order to decide what to do with it. We staged its destruction, to throw the Ministry and Voldemort off the scent. We knew that it had already corrupted Voldemort's inner circle with the mere knowledge of its existence—we did not want the same to happen to the Ministry...or the Order, but it took months to come to that decision. When it was finally agreed that the Guardian should be destroyed, Lily Potter would not hear of it."

"But why?" Harry asked, and Dumbledore raised his hand to silence him.

"She explained to me that the Guardian had become more and more like a free-will being within her, who observed her life with much reverence. Both Lily and James did not know the full history of the Jade Guardian—they had no idea that she was once a real girl who had been bound in death to that vessel of dark magic."

"But I managed to convince her, though she was stubborn—your mother was very much like you, Harry. She knew the importance of giving a soul a chance—in fact, I think she understood then, more than myself, the existence of the Jade Guardian."

"James and I debated with her for days—and it wasn't until we brought up the fact that the Guardian put their lives in danger did Lily agree to destroy it—she did it for you, Harry."

"However, it was unclear as to how the manifested power could be destroyed—as very few records could be found on the actually existence of the pendant. In the end, Lily broke the jade into several pieces and buried them on Hogwarts grounds—in the Forbidden Forest, so that our charms may guard them."

"But after you were born, Lily confessed to me that she still felt the Guardian's presence—as if the spirit of Medraut's heir somehow managed to separate itself from the pendant and stay with her, but it was at a cost, and the spirit nearly faded. Lily also said that the Guardian had seemed to become very attached to you—as it loved what Lily loved. And so Sirius was asked to be the Secret Keeper...and then that duty was passed on to Pettigrew, who in turn, betrayed us all and told Voldemort that the source of power of his days of youthful desires, still existed...in Lily Potter."

"Voldemort came for it a year later—James fought valiantly, knowing that the life of his wife and child were on the line. After the Dark Lord killed your father, he went after your mother—I'm sure the Guardian understood the danger and wanted desperately to save her, but its powers were limited. Lily then died to save you—and somehow holding that link with your mother, I believe the Guardian resided in you, combining its powers with her sacrifice. That joining of magic saved you, crippled Voldemort, and strengthened the invisible armor your mother had left upon you by her death."

"As to why the Guardian has never shown herself before that day she somehow became human—I believe that she used every bit of her power to intensify your mother's gift, and in doing so, knocked herself into a dormant state within you. When was it you started having those dreams?"

It took Harry a second to answer, as he was nearly overwhelmed with all the information.

"The beginning of summer..." he answered. "The dreams started off really faint...and got more vivid."

"I think," Duimbleodore said thoughtfully, "that the image of your parents—of Lily—when the Incantem Priori spell was initiated last year during your duel with Voldemort reawakened the Guardian...but it was weak, and as it grew stronger, it poured the memories it shared with Lily into you, Harry—so that when she was released into flesh, she had no knowledge of her past."

"And when you returned to Hogwarts, your dreams grew even stronger—and by some twist of fate—the storm that day, her growing strength, Lily's desire—the Jade Guardian became flesh—joining the pieces of the pendant she guarded...although, I do not know how that was possible...and I think, no one ever will."

Sirius let out a low breath and turned to look at Harry. Harry tore his gaze from Dumbledore, and his eyes wandered to Fawkes and he watched the bird groom itself delicately.

“But how, then,” Harry managed quietly, thinking of the stone Jade had shattered. “How did Jade overcome the binds of Medraut in France—how did she destroy the pendant and become flesh again?” Dumbledore looked at his guest thoughtfully, pressing the tips of his fingers together so that they formed a steeple before him.

“You cannot just break that which binds a manifested power and it’s vessel—it seems, that you must destroy the source entirely. However—Jade has somehow managed to destroy the key that unlocks that power...the bind will always live in her, but she has grown bigger than it.”

“Then she’s still dangerous,” Sirius broke in, his body stiffening in his chair.

“She was never dangerous,” Dumbledore corrected. “And Lily knew that—the Guardian is only dangerous in the dark hands that had wielded her power, and Lily knew the best way to break the cycle was to save her. However, if you mean whether or not she is *susceptible* to Medraut’s curse—the answer is no. Insured by her flesh and her acceptance of her soul and existence, she may bare the scar—just as Harry bares one from Voldemort—but she can never fall under those chains again.”

\* \* \*

Harry would have nearly felt wholly restored had the end of the interview not meant the end of Sirius’s visit. Dumbledore politely excused himself to his private study so that they could say goodbye.

“What’s next?” Harry asked his godfather as they stood. “I mean, for you—”

“The Dark Lord is still out there,” he replied simply. “And now—his trail has grown cold. I’ll be out there tracking him again.”

“You don’t s’pose maybe he suffered a significant blow with Price stabbing him and Jade kind of...blowing up in his face, do you?”

Sirius tried to suppress his smile, but didn’t succeed. He shook his head and pushed a hand through his dark hair.

“I think he has grown strong enough so that such set backs don’t have much effect on him,” and at Harry’s slightly drawn look added, “but I’d be a hippogriff’s uncle if his pride isn’t significantly bruised—and you know, that’s half his power.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed just as a knock came from the door. Arabella Figg stepped in and greeted them, her youthful face pleasantly intense. Her presence was like a signal to Dumbledore, as he too, stepped into the room. Figg reached out and shook his hand respectfully before turning her attention back to Sirius and Harry.

“I’m sorry,” she said and she truly looked it, “but Black—we need to go—Mundungus is waiting for us.”

Sirius nodded and turned to Harry, the beginnings of an apology on his lips. But Harry quickly shook it off, finding he didn’t need it. He knew something of duty—he had learned young—and he knew what both he and Sirius had to do, respectively.

“Don’t forget to write, okay?” he said and Sirius smiled gratefully, readily agreeing.

“Same to you,” he replied. “You better have gotten twenty O.W.Ls, secured a girlfriend, and managed to blow up at least one toilet the next I hear from you.”

“I can learn to write fiction,” Harry returned and at a strained look from Sirius, added mildly, “just kidding?”

There was a funny click and gasp, and all three visitors turned to find Dumbledore staring at a pocket watch.

“According to the time, Harry” he said. “I believe you’ll be finding a very pleasant surprise waiting for you downstairs.” Sirius grinned at him, and he returned a curious raised eyebrow before his godfather melted into the form of a familiar black dog.

With a little urging from Arabella and Dumbledore, Harry led the way through the oak door and down the whirling spiral steps. At the bottom, the Gargoyle leapt aside, and he was flung forward—right into Ron.

“Are you a center of gravity, or what?” Harry muttered, pushing his glasses back to the bridge of his nose, glaring at his friend. Ron brushed aside his comment and clamored to his feet, leaning over to better match Harry’s height.

“It’s bloody fantastic,” he said, his eyes bright, a grin wide on his face. “You’ll never guess.”

“I grew?” Harry asked amusedly.

“I said it’s fantastic, not a miracle,” Ron said before grabbing Harry’s arm and dragged him down two floors towards the grand staircase.

“Ron—what?” he insisted, yanking his arm from Ron’s grasp. But before he could say anymore, his green eyes trailed to the Entrance hall below.

“Hermione!”

Both boys raced down to meet her.

“Ron! Harry!” she exclaimed happily, her brown eyes bright. “Oh, I missed you two!” and she threw her arms around both of them, successfully slamming their heads together. Ignoring there groans and winces, she managed to plant a kiss on each of their cheeks before pulling away, looking thoroughly embarrassed.

“You’re back!” Ron was exclaiming, rubbing his head. “How? D’you run away from home?” Hermione raised her eyebrows at him and turned to Harry with a quizzical look before ultimately deciding not to comment.

“Well,” she started, “Dumbledore sent out a letter to all our families explaining that Voldemort was behind the muggle attacks in London. It also had an account of the Death Eater putdown in Hogsmeade—and well, my parents came to the conclusion that no matter where I was, there would always be a risk. And the cost of not taking that risk was my happiness and future. They couldn’t deny me that—and besides, they were impressed with just how efficiently Dumbledore and the Hogwarts staff defended not just Hogwarts—but Hogsmeade too.”

“So you’re going to be here for sixth year,” Harry said grinning so wide it was beginning to hurt his cheeks. “But why are you here now? It’s the last day of term.”

“It was Dumbledore—the students who were requested to come home were sent their end-of-term exams (charmed for anti-cheating, of course)—and a ticket for the Hogwarts Express so that we may turn them in personally and come to the end-of-year feast.”

They fell into a flurry of conversation, filling in the past two weeks they spent apart, as the Weasleys and Dumbledore filed into the Entrance Hall around them.

“And wait until you see who was in my train compartment,” Hermione said with a smile, suddenly looking over both Ron and Harry’s shoulders. Harry slowly turned his head to find McGonagall leading three people, one a very familiar girl, out of one of the side chambers.

“Jade?” he said, his eyes wide. Beside him, Ron’s jaw dropped.

“Harry, Ron, Hermione!”

She turned from McGonagall and raced towards the three. She looked different now—a little too pale, and her hair was cut short, but there she was. Harry and Ron hardly recognized her.

“You’re okay!” Harry exclaimed grinning at her. She nodded exuberantly, thumping her chest rather proudly.

“And I’ve got a scar,” she said. “Had to con that nice French doctor in *L’Espoir de Magie* to let me keep it...you want to see?”

“Jade,” Hermione said wearily just as Ron exclaimed “yeah!” “You’d think scar tissue was fashionable,” she added, elbowing Ron in the ribs.

“—AND I’ve got the scar for the exit wound, too,” Jade was hissing to the boys excitedly, pulling up her shirt to reveal a puckered strip of skin on her stomach.

“Wicked!” Ron breathed, just as Harry muttered “Er...nice?” Hermione rolled her eyes and pressed her hand to her forehead.

“Jade!” a graceful, dark-haired woman strode up to them followed closely by a cheery-faced man. “Not again,” she sighed much like a weary mother.

“Sorry,” Jade muttered sheepishly, straightening her shirt. At the surprised looks on Ron and Harry’s faces she grinned.

“Ron, Harry,” Jade said proudly. “These are my parents—Jacqueline and Marius Cordonnier.” And seeing that the dumbfounded looks had yet to fade from their faces added, “Respectively, of course.” Harry recovered first and reached out to shake their hands.

“A pleasure,” he said forcing a smile as he cast Hermione a curious glance.

“And you know Hermione,” Jade was saying to the couple. “We sat with her on the train.”

“Honor to meet you, Harry Potter,” Mr. Cordonnier was saying, and turned to shake Ron’s hand. Mrs. Cordonnier beamed at all three of their faces, her eyes glistening with tears.

“I’m so happy I get to thank you three in person,” she breathed, resting an arm around Jade’s shoulder. “What you all did for Jade—”

Hermione’s face went crimson and Harry and Ron attempted to brush away the thanks.

“Ah, Marius, Jacqueline.”

Dumbledore appeared behind them, taking time to shake the Cordonnier’s hands. He looked at Jade and smiled warmly.

“What a pleasure to see you back,” he said genuinely. She grinned

“Thank you, professor.”

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley turned to greet Mr. and Mrs. Cordonnier, and in the swarm of familiar faces, Lupin appeared, Arabella, accompanied by a big, black dog, right behind him. Mr. Weasley turned and did a double take when he saw the dog. Harry knew that he knew of Sirius—but just as the twins had been initially shocked, so now, was Mr. Weasley, who paled obviously.

“Is this—?” he asked Professor Lupin quietly. Lupin nodded and Mr. Weasley turned and looked down at the dog.

“I don’t know how much leeway I’m going to have now that I’m junior Minister,” he said quietly at the intently staring dog. “You understand that I am still hardly popular at the Ministry—but I will try to the extent of my capabilities to right things for you.”

Snuffles blinked his dark eyes at the balding man, and Harry saw that that simple act was filled with respect and gratitude. He looked over at Ron’s father and smiled gratefully himself.

Sirius cuffed softly and turned away, allowing Hermione, Ron, Harry, and even Jade to pat him before he trailed after Arabella out the front doors. As they shut, Harry couldn’t help feeling a little hopeful again.

“Hermione! Jade!” Mrs. Weasley was now parting through her children towards the girls. When she reached them, she wrapped each in a hug. “So nice to see both of you—”

She turned and looked at Hermione with twinkling eyes, resting one plump hand on her forearm.

"And to hear that you're back for good," she said shaking her head. "Hogwart's most clever witch— You know Ron has been moping around since you left—said things just weren't right without you here."

Ron's face went purple and suddenly his long body hunched down so that he was shorter than Harry.

"I did not!" he whined as Hermione cast him a surprised look. Mrs. Weasley continued, furthering Ron's torment, and soon everyone in the entrance hall seemed involved in a conversation except Jade and Harry.

"D'you want to go for a walk?" she asked him quietly, easing back towards the front doors.

"Yeah," he said and followed her. They slipped onto the grounds unnoticed.

For a while, they didn't say anything—instead, they concentrated on finding a path that avoided the other milling students.

"So, those are your parents," Harry said awkwardly as they circled the edge of the forest. He wasn't sure how much she remembered or knew and he wasn't about to tweak her psychosis anymore than it was already bound to be.

"Aren't they great?" she said dreamily. "And ever so careful to avoid the subject of my past"

Harry nearly tripped over his own feet. He looked at her in shock. Jade grinned back at him triumphantly.

"So you remember—you know," he said.

"Being 1500 years old and bound to a green rock isn't exactly something you forget—"

"That's not what I meant," Harry said, shaking his head. "I meant—that even after everything—you're going to be okay with who you are." Jade's face turned serious and she kicked at a stone. It flew into a low shrub, sending some rodent or another scampering away. She started walking again and Harry followed, awaiting her answer.

"I spent a lot of time the past two weeks, thinking," she admitted. "It took so many people giving so much effort. Dumbledore's refusal to turn me in, your, Hermione, and Ron's friendship, Marius and Jacqueline's ready acceptance of me...Dumbledore told me they volunteered to be my parents in attempts to keep me from the Ministry—and now, they've become the only true parents I've ever known. It's because of all these people I'm living—*really* living. I've got free will, a Cognito, I'm sure of that now. It'd be stupid of me to use it to...well, make a stupid decision...even if I've been jaded (no pun intended) by my existence. So I chose to ignore my past and concentrate on the present, rather than dwell on something I've been saved from."

Jade looked up from the ground and turned to look at Harry.

"I also remember your mother," she added quietly. Harry found that he couldn't say anything, even though he knew those images of his parents in their youthful prime that had haunted him in his sleep were from her.

"She showed me love, compassion, and life through her eyes," Jade continued to explain difficultly. "And when she made the greatest sacrifice for you—she saved me too."

And it was then the connection he had felt with Jade grew clear. She had known his mother intimately—and passed those moments on to him, building a bridge between he and his parents.

"Thank you," Harry finally said, smiling rather sadly at her. If he had been someone else, he would have been bitter with Jade—after all, if not for her, maybe his parents would have been alive. But he knew too well of the disillusionments of the "what if?" game...he had learned that lesson well last year with Cedric Diggory.

"There you two are," Hermione said. "I wanted to tell you who else was on our train—" Jade and Harry looked up at her, a bit surprised, as they now found themselves near the west courtyard. Ron cleared his throat from his place next to Hermione, grinning slyly.

“Look who we found,” he said.

“Hi, Harry,” Cho Chang stepped forward, smiling.

“Cho!” Harry exclaimed surprised, his voice jumping up an octave. Blushing furiously, he cleared his throat. “You’re back—I mean...hi!”

Jade, Hermione, and Ron grinned amusedly and began to walk away, leaving Harry to conquer his vocalization skills alone.

“I missed you—er...and you missed a great game—that Mckennett of Hufflepuff—” Harry was babbling now, and what’s worse was he knew it. It was just that Cho was blushing nearly as much as he was...

“So how are you?” they blurted out at the same time. They laughed it off a bit nervously, but soon found themselves in a bit of an awkward silence.

“You missed me?” Cho spoke up, a bit uncertainly. It took all his will power not to choke.

“Well—yes.”

Cho smiled, averting her eyes, but Harry could see that they were glistening. She swallowed hard and stuffed her hands into the pockets of her jeans. Harry knew that the thought of Cedric was on her mind—how could it not with the new wave of Voldemort activity in the air? He was considering walking away when Cho suddenly stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek.

“You’re a good friend, Harry,” she said quickly, before starting away. “I just wanted you to know that.”

Harry watched her go, slowly raising a hand to touch his face. He could live with that, he thought, smiling at her back as she slipped into the castle joining a group of her friends.

“Harry!”

He sighed and turned to find Hagrid was waving to him from several yards away, Hermione, Ron, and Jade sniggering around him. “You don’t want to miss the feast, do yeh?”

\* \* \*

The Great Hall had been splendidly decorated in black and yellow for the end-of-year-feast where Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and the Cordonniers had been guests. Hufflepuff, after over fifty years, had at last won the house cup. After a small moment of silence for Cedric Diggory, cheers went up all around for Dina McKennett, the talented Hufflepuff seeker who had caught the snitch seconds before Hogsmeade was attacked. Harry never thought he cheered louder.

The Weasley twins had managed to charm the floating candles so that just as dessert appeared, they erupted like flaming Filibuster Fireworks. The flickering lights spelt out “Cheers to the best years of our marauding lives,” and left both Flitwick and McGonagall so impressed by their handy work, the stern Headmistress let them alone, heads and all.

Afterward, Harry, Ron, Hermione, the twins and Ginny stayed in the Entrance Hall as the other students retreated to their last-minute packing.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley said good-bye to them all and shook hands with Dumbledore and Mr. and Mrs. Cordonnier before departing to Hogsmeade so that they could apparate home. After they left, Ginny and the twins excused themselves, wishing the others a goodnight as they climbed the stairs.

“Time to go, sweetheart,” Mrs. Cordonnier said to Jade as she finished her conversation with Dumbledore. Jade nodded and turned to Hermione, Ron, and Harry.

“I guess I’m off,” she said.

“Where are you off to?” Hermione asked, clearly not wishing to say goodbye.

"We're going to Beacon Square in Glasgow," she answered. "Then my parents and I are flying in a 'air-plane' to Bulgaria. Not very keen on Portkey travel now, you know. They have some business with their work they need to take care of before we can move back to our home in Sussex. But first, we're going to France to visit my grandparents." She sighed, and behind her, the man who was now her father chuckled.

"Are you coming back to Hogwarts next year?" Harry asked. Jade shrugged her shoulders and flashed a bittersweet smile.

"I think I want to spend a little time with my family next year," she said. "And there's so much I need to learn and so many places I need to visit if I want to be a Historian of muggle-wizard relationships..." she paused and fiddled with the hem of her shirt. Harry couldn't expect anything else from her—after all, she had a lot of making up to do for all the years she spent in lifelessness, and she looked so excited about all the new adventures she would be embarking on.

"So..." Jade spoke up into the awkward silence, "You three better write—and visit"—she choked a bit—"a lot." She looked like she wanted to say more, but in the end she simply hugged each of them. "I'm going to miss you so much—thank you. For everything."

Mr. and Mrs. Cordonnier shook hands with Ron, Harry, and Hermione and they and Dumbledore watched the Cordonnier's carriage pull away from Hogwarts and through the massive gates.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Harry awoke with the rest of the school. He, Ron, and Hermione (who only participated to inflict revenge on the boys for slipping a Big Bottom Bon Bon onto her plate at breakfast) spent the first part of the morning using up the last of Fred and George's joke items as they had strewn loads around the Gryffindor Common Room. Before they knew it, everyone was clamoring down the stairs and out of the castle towards the carriages that awaited them.

They arrived at Hogsmeade station to find the village around them bustling now at its normal pace.

Hagrid came to see them off, giving each a bear hug that, almost certainly, cracked a rib or two. Harry knew no other who could injure someone with as much sincerity and genuine affection as the gentle half-giant.

"And Harry?" Hagrid said before Harry could climb up the steps onto the Hogwarts Express. "I knew yeh choose right 'bout, Jade. That's why you're stronger than You-Know-Who. You've got a bigger magic—you've got compassion...and faith in your fellows, you do—like your parents."

Harry grinned gratefully at his friend, feeling the blood rush to his cheeks.

"Thanks, Hagrid," he replied simply, stepping onto the train after Ron and Hermione.

The ride was like any other trip home—or rather, in Harry's case—every trip away from home. The first few hours were filled with people filing in and out of their compartment and after the lunch trolley came and went, the flow of people ebbed away.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were left to talk about everything—catching up for the last two weeks, talking (excitedly, in Hermione's case) about the results of the O.W.L.s, which would be arriving at their doorsteps within a few weeks, and the past year. And when they had run out of things to say, they sat comfortably in their mutual silence, watching the afternoon grow rich with orange hues.

Before they knew it, they had reached King's Cross Station. Hermione helped Ron and Harry by carrying both Pigwidgeon and Hedwig in their respective cages as they dragged their overstuffed trunks off the train and onto platform 9 3/4 .

They waved to Dean and Seamus as they disappeared through the barrier, and Mandy Brocklehurst and Cho made their way over to say goodbye before falling back amongst the crowd.

As soon as they could, they slipped through the barrier and found themselves on a crowded platform ten.

“Ron, there’s mum!” Ginny called from several feet away and started forcing her way towards her mother with the help of the twins.

“Remember us, little tykes!” Fred and George called into the crowd, Lee Jordan and Angelina whooping their agreement.

“And now,” Fred was adding, “we are free to waste our insane amounts of talent on jokes.”

“And inflict our humorous disease on the Internet!” George added, plowing through the muggles who stared at the identical figures with raised eyebrows.

“Can they do that?” Hermione asked Ron curiously.

“They’ve developed some muggle-safe items,” he answered. “I feel really sorry for that Intra-net bloke, though.”

Harry and Hermione exchanged smiles. Hedwig let out a quiet cluck and Harry looked up to find Uncle Vernon standing red-faced and impatient near the newsstand. He nearly did a double take when he caught sight of the refrigerator-size boy next to him—it was *Dudley*! Except now, instead of looking like a beached whale, he appeared brawny and solid—as if all his fat had hardened into muscle—he looked like he could have taken out all the wrestlers in the World Wrestling Federation with one hand tied behind his back.

Harry gulped.

“What’s wrong—?” Hermione started to ask, until she caught sight of Dudley. “Oh.” Ron craned his neck and raised his eyebrow catching a glimpse of the rhinoceros boy.

“Don’t worry, Harry,” he said. “You’ve got a wand and a murderous Godfather—he’s got nothing on you.”

“Expect 200 pounds of solid muscle mass,” Harry returned, laughing despite the predicament. He looked at Ron and Hermione thoughtfully, and for a moment, none of them spoke.

Another year was over, they had nearly lost their lives, and in the end Harry was returning to the Dursleys—happy, no less, with the loyalty of his friends and the memories of his parents to keep him company over the lonely summer months. Voldemort would have to try much harder to take those away from him.

“You gonna be okay?” Ron spoke up, nodding his head in the direction of Harry’s relatives.

“Perfectly fine,” Harry replied with a grin. “You said it yourself, Dudley’s got nothing on me.” And it was true—Dudley didn’t have Ron and Hermione for friends...or a murderous Godfather for that matter.

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